

Second Chances by dragonartist5

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Sara Hopper (Mentioned)

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-06

Updated: 2018-09-23

Packaged: 2022-04-23 02:41:40

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 24

Words: 53,559

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

"She's not Sara." Hopper said, sniffing. He brushed at his eyes, and forced himself to meet Joyce's worried, tired eyes. "She's not Sara, but . . ." He paused, searching for words. There were so many things he ought to say, but he'd never been one for grand soliloquies. "Sometimes I feel like the universe is giving me a second chance, you know?"

1. Snow and Silence

El ran, and the branches bit and tore into her legs, her dress. She didn't pause for breath, only ran, choking back tears, ignoring the pounding in her head and the stitch in her side. Sirens wailed and lights flashed. Overhead, a helicopter made wide, sweeping circles through the sky, shining a searchlight over the uniform streets of Mike's neighborhood.

Mike.

The bad men were at his house, questioning him, tainting him with their empty promises and *lies*.

Lies lies lies lies lies lies

The word repeats, over and over, in her mind like a mantra, until the sound detaches itself from meaning and hangs there, in the dark.

Lies ruled her life, defined every chapter, one after another, until she found him.

Mike.

He was the only truth she'd ever known. He taught her what it is to be a friend, to be kind. To be brave. He was (is) a promise.

El pressed her palm over her lips, still coated in slime and sticky membrane. An enormous, agonized gasp slipped from her mouth, muffled by her fingers.

No time. No time to think about him, now. No time to go back, to reach him, to touch him, to hold him in her arms.

She stopped when she reached the woods, near Mirkwood, near the storm drain's entrance. Her fingers brushed over the bark of the nearest tree, and she leaned against it, cupping a stitch in her side.

She wiped her face with her hand, clearing away the dirt and tears and goo, and glanced at the sky. The helicopter drew nearer, and she could hear its propeller whirring, filling the night with its ugly, mechanic hum.

She forced herself to move, fear and instinct drawing her away from the clearing, towards a fallen tree. She got on her hands and knees and crawled through the foliage, nestling into the bushes. She stole another glance at the sky. The helicopter's searchlight drowned out the stars.

For a moment, it was quiet. El attempted to slow her breathing, sucking oxygen through her nose. The soil underneath her was cool and damp, and the mid-November air carried a chill. Her clothes were still damp from the kiddie pool, and coated in wet slime. She shivered and tucked her knees up to her chest, trying to make herself as small as possible.

She could hear all types of woodland creatures moving about in the brush and in the trees. An owl crooned, and a lone cricket sung its ballad in the bushes only a foot away.

Tears welled in her eyes and spilled over her lashes. A branch snapped, and faint voices punctured the gentle mumblings of the animals in the woods.

The voices grew louder, and flashlight beams sliced through the darkness, skirting the ground, dipping and wobbling. El closes her eyes, listening to the voices draw nearer, trembling. And over and over in her mind, the word *promise*. She anchors herself in that word, accompanied by Mike's earnest, freckled face.

An hour passed, and two, and the bad men moved into another part of the woods. She drifted in and out of consciousness, and everything in her body ached. The dull pounding in her head wouldn't go away.

She woke as the sky began to lighten, filling the woods with soft, gray light. She stifled a yawn with her hand and sat up, carefully, straining her ears against the silence. The bad men were gone. The helicopters were gone. The sirens were gone.

She stood, and the muscles in her legs protested, painfully. She was stiff and sore from lying there for so long. She took a tentative step and wiggled her toes inside her sneakers, trying to work the feeling back into her legs.

El's stomach groaned. She wished she had Eggos, or any of Dustin's snacks, really. She was thirsty, too.

She spent the day wandering the woods, debating whether she should risk a visit to the town. It was dangerous, but she was so hungry, so tired . . .

She decided against it. The bad men were still looking for her. She needed to stay safe, stay hidden.

The hours bled into days, and the days bled into one another.

El wandered, treading softly, careful to stay out of sight and away from the roads. The days grew colder. The nights were coldest. She pulled the blue flannel, grimy and worn with holes, tighter around herself. She watched her exhalations float and dance in the air, dressed in white. She got water from a small stream running through the woods. She learned to find food, to hunt, to build a fire.

She began to count the days.

On the third day, she killed a rat and ate it, grateful for what small bit of nourishment it gave. In the lab, she killed a small, white mouse not unlike it. Papa told her to.

On the seventh day, three high school boys wandered into the woods. El heard their voices and dropped to the ground, covering her mouth with her hand to muffle her breathing. They paused in a clearing only a couple yards to her left. She could hear the click of a lighter, and made out the soft, orange glow of a cigarette. They remained there for an hour or so, chainsmoking and talking and laughing. As they turned to leave, the lighter floated out of a boy's jacket pocket and landed in her open palm. El ran her fingertip over the cool, smooth metal, wiped the trickle of blood from her upper lip, and smiled. In the late afternoon, she built a small fire, and enjoyed the first warmth she'd felt in the better part of a week.

On the thirteenth day, it snowed. It was the first time she'd ever seen snow. It was beautiful, at first, all the flakes in the breeze, melting on her lashes and her tongue. Eventually, the wind picked up, and the snow came harder, at an odd angle, stinging her cheeks, freezing her bare legs. She pulled her arms and knees into the flannel and built up a fire. She avoided sleep, scared that if she drifted off she'd freeze. Sometime in the night, though, she nodded off.

When she awoke, three-foot snow drifts covered every surface. The woods had transformed into something entirely new. She trudged through the drifts, knowing she must keep herself moving. The snow clung to her dirty pink dress. Her whole body ached, from the cold and loneliness. Snow blanketed the tree boughs, and the branches bent under their weight. Eventually, the snow grew too heavy, and it fell with a soft *thud* to the ground. She jumped at these noises, at the softest twitch in the brush. Eventually, she memorized the sounds, grew immune to them, because those cold, inhuman sounds were the only thing that kept her company.

Another week crawled by, and another. El trudged through the snow, trying desperately to keep warm, to keep putting one foot in front of the other. El had been alone for so long, she wasn't even sure she was alive, if she was real. El raised her hands to her face and pressed them over her frigid cheeks, and tears spilled over lashes.

"I'm real." She said, aloud. Her voice was ragged, barely audible from so little use. She started and glanced around, heart racing. Her voice was so loud, so impossibly loud. A squirrel paused on a branch above her. It cocked its head, curiosity winning over fear. It became a meal. It was skinny, from the winter and the shortage of food, but it was enough.

She caught sight of her reflection in the stream and paused, horrified. The girl's image, wavering in the water, was not her own. The girl was skinny, too skinny. Her eyes were empty and sunken in, her bones much too prominent. Her fingernails were torn and bloodied and dirty, from the biting. She stared at the ragged skin around her cuticles, then back at her reflection, trying to find some piece of herself. Trying to find something, anything, left of the girl called El.

The days faded into a colorless smear, immeasurable, and El

wondered if any time passed, at all.

She counted the days. On day twenty-two, she attempted to build a shelter out of a fallen sticks and cut her thumb on the jagged edge of a branch. Blood leaked out of the wound, ran the length of the lines in her palms. She gasped, clenched a fist around the bloody cut. She licked her lips and closed her eyes, savoring the sting, the ghost of her pulse in the wound, like a second heartbeat. She sat back and laughed. The woods filled with her rough, maniac laughter. A bird took flight, startled.

"I'm alive." She said, laughing, holding her sides. "I'm alive."

It felt good.

This was pain. This was a bleeding, beating heart. A life force.

On day twenty-seven, a man approached her, holding a rifle, speaking softly. She could see the glint in his eyes, the hunger. She knew that look, she'd seen it too many times. This man was dangerous. Her eyes moved from the gun to his face, and she kept still, heart beating in her throat. The squirrel she'd been cooking rose up and struck the man in the face. She rushed toward him, trembling with anger and fear, and ripped his jacket from his shoulders. She threw it hastily around and her, and, after a pause, took his hat, too.

She ran, finding it hard to breathe or think. She ran until she'd put as much distance between herself and the man as possible, then sank to the ground and buried her face in her hands. She cried until there was nothing left, until she felt empty and numb.

She stood up, and put the jacket on. She zipped it.

It fell past her knees, and the sleeves were much too long. The scent that clung to the fabric was unfamiliar, unpleasant. The jacket was warm, though. And the nights were growing colder, still. She needed the jacket. She ran her hands through her hair, which had begun to grow, and put the hat on, too.

The shelter functioned, though it wasn't perfect. On a particularly warm afternoon, the snow began to melt, and the water dropped

through the cracks in the branches. El awoke to the sudden cold on her face, the water droplets falling on her cheeks and nose. Her hat was soaked through. She shivered, sat up, and dragged herself out of the shelter to find more sticks. She tried her best to repair the holes.

She spent a lot of time asleep, curled up in the shelter, trying to keep warm. She lit fires only out of necessity, scared someone or something would see the smoke and flame and come after her.

While she slept, she dreamt. Most of her dreams wandered, full of darkness and shadows and long paths leading to nowhere. Echoey, unintelligible voice called out to her from the darkness, some menacing, some beckoning. Other dreams, she found herself back in the lab, back with Papa.

Mike was a regular visitor in her dreams. Sometimes she saw him in a distant memory, the first night in the woods, or kneeling in front of her, teaching her the definition of *friend* or *promise*. Sometimes he screamed and cried, and she tried to get to him, to take his pain away, but she'd wake before she reached him. Sometimes, was just *there*, close, caressing her face or her hand, never speaking. And his presence was so strong, so *real*. She'd wake up and the feeling would fade, leaving only the biting cold and snow and silence.

She began to talk out loud, to reassure herself of her own existence. She mumbled words, phrases, tasting the syllables, listening to her own voice.

On the thirtieth day, after a particularly long stretch without anything to eat, she stumbled and fell and didn't get up. She stayed there, tears running down her face, and waited to die. She *wanted* to die. She watched the sun's procession across the sky through the cracks in the branches. It sank, bathing the woods in long shadows and yellow light.

El drifted in and out of consciousness, numb and dreamless.

She opened her eyes. The stars winked and glittered. A rabbit wandered by, fur coated in snow. It paused, poised on its hind legs, and blinked. It remained there for a long moment, ears twitching, then went about its business, unconcerned.

She inhaled, staring up at the sky, shaking from the hunger and the cold. Slowly, painstakingly, she lifted her hand to her face and pressed it against her cheek. Her fingers had begun to turn blue. She sniffed, swallowing the tears.

She made herself move, then, biting her lips to keep from crying out, because her whole body hurt. It hurt to move or think or breathe and she didn't know if she wanted to keep going on like this. There was no end or beginning, just pain. And snow. And silence.

It was much too quiet.

Blood ran over her teeth and her tongue, mingling with saliva. She spit.

She stood up, swayed, dizzy on her feet. The rabbit paused again, cocked its head.

"You promised." El whispered, to herself. She shook her sleeves over her hands and drew them close to her body. El turned her back on the animal and stumbled off.

On the thirty-sixth day, a car engine rumbled in the distance. She froze, licking her chapped lips. Darkness had long fallen, and she thought she ought to return to her makeshift shelter. Something kept her there, though, frozen, listening to the engine cut and die. Before she could fully comprehend a decision, her legs carried her toward the noise. She stopped, near the road, and cling to a tree. A man, armed with a flashlight, made his way through the woods. He was large and tall, and he wore a hat, and something about his lumbering gait seemed familiar. She covered her mouth with her sleeve and waited. The man paused, looked over his shoulder, then to the left and right. He knelt down. For the first time, El noticed a small, wooden box, half buried in the snow. She watched. She waited.

The man turned his head, and El connected name to face. This was the Chief. This was the big man that helped them save Will. This man cared. This man was good.

She watched him pull a small package out of his pocket, lift the lid of the wooden box, and place the package inside. He sighed, ran a hand

over the stubble on his face, and straightened up. El remained by the knot of snow laden trees, still and silent. Her heart beat against her chest, fast. A part of her wanted step into the beam of his flashlight. She made to move forward, but something kept her there, concealed, among the trees.

Hopper turned to leave, throwing a last, weary glance over his shoulder.

El waited until the car engine hummed to life, then faded as he carped down Mirkwood, before creeping out of her hiding place. She knelt before the box and lifted the lid. Inside, there was a small, plastic container. She picked it up and turned it over in her hands, then pried open the lid. There was a small bread roll, wrapped in a napkin, and an apple. She took the roll and crammed it into her mouth, shut the box, and took off into the woods, hugging the container close to her chest.

El sat in the shelter, that night, chewing the bread, mind and heart racing. He knew she was here, cared enough to leave food. She fell asleep with her stomach full, feeling considerably lighter and warmer. Content.

Hopper visited several more times, over the course of the week. El waited for him in the evenings, crouched low to the ground. Sometimes, he waits a few moments, peering into the woods, shining his light on the shrubbery, the bushes. Sometimes he lights a cigarette and takes a few drags, thinking. Often, he sighs, deflated, and makes the trip to his car in silence.

On the night of his fourth visit, El watched him leave. She steeled herself, swallowing, and followed him out of the woods.

No more.

No more hiding.

As he reached his car, he turned. She stopped, looking at him, trying to conceal the trembling.

He saved Will. He brought her food.

Hopper swallowed, took off his hat.

"Eleven?" He asked, softly.

"El." She said.

Hopper drew a shaky breath and smiled.

"Merry Christmas, El."

2. The Ghost of Christmas Past

Will wasn't released from the hospital for more than a week. Joyce remained by his side day after day, there before visiting hours, only leaving when the doctors and nurses forced her out. When she wasn't with Will, she smoked cigarette after cigarette, spent a lot of time staring at walls.

"Joyce, you need sleep." Hopper told her, touching her elbow. They were standing outside the hospital's front doors, watching the cars pull in and out of the parking lot. She looked at him, scoffed, and threw her cigarette onto the concrete, crushing it under the toe of her sneaker.

"I'm getting sleep."

"Joyce, c'mon. You're gonna kill yourself, alright? You're exhausted. When's the last time you got six hours of sleep in a row?"

"God, I don't know." She said, shrugging, annoyed.

"Will's home. He's safe. He's in good hands. Just, do me a favor, get some rest." He pleaded. Joyce forced a smile.

"Okay, Hop. Alright." She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. She climbed into her car. He watched her pull out of the parking lot.

In his trailer, he climbed into the shower, letting the hot water run over his body. After, he made himself a peanut butter sandwich, cracked a beer, and sat down to watch the news. On his old, finicky television set, a woman stood with her back to the woods, reporting the story on Will's reappearance. Hopper groaned, reaching for the remote. He swallowed, and changed the channel.

He had a hell of a lot of covering up to do, a lot of shit to sweep under the rug. He'd already dealt with several calls from various news stations, and numerous visits from worried residents of Hawkins, complaining about the rumored kidnapping.

A lot of the reporters wanted to interview Will personally, and the

answer was always the same. The kid didn't need notepads and cameras shoved in his face. He needed bed rest and Sunday morning cartoons and time with his family, whatever it took to start down the long road to recovery. Hopper shivered, recalling the boy's' frail state, the translucent skin and shadowed eyes. And Joyce, though she looked a hell of a lot better now that Will was home, remained sleep deprived and apprehensive. Whenever he was around her, he could feel the anxiety radiating off her. Hopper was worried about her, worried about her kid.

The government buffoons from the lab had been laying low, the past week. Hopper hadn't heard from them, though he knew they were watching, waiting for him to screw up. They still had a threat hanging over his head, and their radio silence kept him on edge.

Hopper stood up, dumped his plate in the sink, and reached for his pack of cigarettes. They were too busy cleaning up, covering up, to do anything at the moment. Too busy looking for their little science project. He went outside, to the balcony overlooking the lake, and took a long drag, watching the water lap up onto the lake's shore.

That girl, the one they called Eleven . . .

She disappeared. At least, that's what the Wheeler kid claimed. Part of him knew it was true. Wheeler was distraught, almost hysterical, by the time Hopper showed up to the school after Will had been brought back to the hospital. Hopper didn't think the poor kid was lying. Hopper had gambled with her life, traded it for Will's, used her as a pawn, and now she was gone, probably dead.

Hopper pushed the thought from his mind. He had enough bullshit to deal with on his own, he couldn't afford to dwell on another missing kid, one he barely knew. He had enough bullshit to deal with, anyway. He had to let her go, or he was going to make himself crazy. He might fall right off the edge.

The days went on, and November bled into December. Hopper found way to keep himself busy. He worked, he drank and smoked. He made it a routine, to check up on Joyce, to visit Will. He begrudgingly agreed to go on a diet, much to Flo's delight. And through the days, that girl, the one with the shaved head and the

tortured eyes, dwelled in the back of his mind. She joined the cast of shadows in his dreams, his nightmares. And one afternoon, in early December, the police station received a phone call that old Bill Dearing was discovered in the middle of the woods, unconscious and frostbitten, and missing his jacket. Hopper took down the case report, and Bill recovered, and life went on, except . . .

Except.

When Bill came into the hospital, distraught, he told the nurses he'd seen a ghost. A little girl. A little girl with short hair. A little girl who made things fly without touching them. A little girl who took what she need and nothing more. A little girl who disappeared into the snow without a trace. A ghost.

Hopper knelt beside the wooden box, staring at the trees, fingers growing numb.

Come out, kid. I know you're here.

He wanted to say it. He wanted to call out, to say her name aloud. He was beginning to wonder if she really was a ghost, if crazy old Bill was talking nonsense. If Eleven really was taking the frozen Eggos. It could be a wild animal, a raccoon, for all he knew. Hopper stood, stretching his legs, and began the trek back to his car.

He paused, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck begin to stand. He turned, breath snagging in his throat. She stared at him, gaze unwavering. A wave of relief crashed over his head, so powerful it stole all the oxygen from his lungs for a brief moment. Absently, he reached for his hat.

Here she was, swathed in old Bill's stolen jacket, trembling from head to toe, looking frail and gaunt and pale. His very own Ghost of Christmas Past.

He remained there, looking at her, hesitant to move or breathe or speak for fear of scaring her off. She stood, poised in tip toes, ready to flee at any indication of danger.

"Eleven?" He asked.

"El." She said, defiantly. He nodded.

He wasn't too keen for holiday celebrations. With Sara, Christmas took on an entirely new definition. It was full of joy and light and wonder. After Sara the Christmas lights hanging from the eaves seemed to dim, the carols and well-wishes became bothersome instead of cheerful. Around Christmas, losing her became a little more unbearable.

Hopper looked at El, reaching for words. It was Christmas Eve, after all, and who better to spend it with?

Hopper scooped her up and carried her to the car and propped her up in the passenger seat and drove to his trailer, beside the lake. He carried her inside. She was dead weight in his arms, head lolling, warm breath tickling his neck. She was so fragile, so small, and exhausted.

"Hold on, El. We need to get you cleaned up, alright? Once you've had a bath and warmed up a bit, you can sleep. You can sleep as long as you want." He said, softly.

"Promise?" She mumbled, eyelids fluttering. Her fingers curled around the collar of his jacket.

"Promise."

He carried her to the bathroom and sat her down on the toilet seat. He turned the faucet and filled up the bathtub,

Then, he knelt in front of her and set to work untying her shoes. Carefully, he removed them, revealing dirty, worn socks underneath, so caked with mud it was hard to tell the original color. As he did this, El kept a hand on his shoulder, steadying herself, and head still bobbing as she drifted in and out of consciousness. Hopper peeled away her socks, revealing raw, swollen feet.

"Let's get you up." He said, grabbing her upper arm, helping her stand up. She swayed, unbalanced.

"Here, hang onto my arm, okay?" He instructed. She obeyed, and Hopper helped her peel off the jacket and the hat, and the tattered flannel underneath. The flannel he lent her, the night they brought Will back. The night she disappeared. She'd been out there, on her own, for more than a month, in the snow and bitter cold.

Hopper draped the clothes over the toilet seat. She stood, in only her dress, and Hopper cleared his throat, looking at her thin, fragile form.

"Okay. I'm going to give you some privacy. Get in the bath and wash up, alright?" He asked, putting a hand on her shoulder. She nodded. Hopper stood, paused on his way out the door. I'll make you some food."

He made to close the door, but it wouldn't budge, pulled by some invisible force. He looked at her, cocking an eyebrow. He knew she was special, knew she had abilities. She looked at him, brow furrowed, and wiped her lip with the back of her hand.

"Keep the door open." She said, softly. "Please." Hopper nodded.

"Alright. The door stays open." He said. She gave him a small, tentative smile. He left the door open, just a crack, and made his way down the hall.

Hopper dug around in his closet, pulling out some sweatpants and a sweater, and laid them in the hall, just outside the bathroom. They were too big for her, but he didn't have any other options, at the moment.

"Kid, I put some clothes out here, for you. Come out when you're ready, I'm making dinner for the two of us." He said, swallowing the strangeness of having someone else in the house, another person to worry about, another mouth to feed.

"Okay." El said.

Hopper busied himself in the kitchen, pulling bread out of the cabinets, cheese and butter out of the fridge, and started on some grilled cheese sandwiches. He set the plates on the coffee table, two instead of one.

El appeared in the doorway. The sweater hung past her knees, and the sweatpants seemed to swallow her, covering her bare feet, baggy and bunched in odd places. She looked at him, licked her lips, nervously.

"I made dinner." He said, gesturing to the grilled cheese sandwiches. Tentatively, she came toward him, and sat herself down on the couch. He sat beside her, and handed her a sandwich. She bit into it, and her eyes lit up. Hopper laughed, grinning at her.

"There's more where that came from, kid. I'm not a great cook, but you won't starve. Not on my watch." He chuckled, watching her wolf down the sandwich.

"Take it easy, you're going to make yourself sick."

She blinked at him, took more time between mouthfuls. Comfortable silence hung over them, interrupted only their quiet chewing. Hopper stood, went to the fridge, and got a beer. He poured a glass of water for El, and handed it to her.

"What did you eat? When you were out there?"

She regards him, thoughtfully.

"Animals. I killed. Built a fire." She said, simply, wiping her fingers.

"And the jacket?" Hopper said.

El swallowed, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Bad man. Tried to hurt me. Tried to touch me." El shuddered, covered her mouth with her hand. Hopper put a hand on her shoulder, regretting bringing it up. She flinched at his touch.

"It's okay, El. You're not in trouble." He said, softly. She wiped her eyes and took another bite of the sandwich.

"Hey, kid, those bad guys, the scientists, they're still after you. You have to stay hidden." Hopper said. "And I thought . . . I thought maybe you could live with me, for a while." He said, surprised to find he didn't regret the suggestion.

There. It was done. No taking it back, now.

He wasn't so sure he knew what he was getting himself into. But what other choice did he have? She didn't have anywhere else to go.

"Stay here?" She asked, softly.

"Not here, no. It's too easy for people to find you, here. But I think I can work something out." He said, thinking about the cabin. It hadn't been used in years, and it was so far out, on the outskirts of town. Nobody would find her there.

El leaned back, watching him.

"What is . . . Christmas?"

Hopper chuckled.

"It's a holiday. Kind of like a party. A special day, for people to spend time with their families and eat and get fat and play games." El blinked, overwhelmed.

"Family?"

"Yeah, family. People that you love."

She nodded, staring into her lap.

"Wanna watch some T.V.?" Hopper asked, reaching for the remote. He clicked it on, flipped through the channels, until he found A Charlie Brown Christmas. He gathered up their plates and put them in the sink, then went to the hallway closet and grabbed an armful of blankets.

He handed them to El, and she burrowed into them, pulling the fleece all around her body. She was asleep within seconds, breathing softly, dead weight against his side. Hopper watched her face, and his heart crawled into his throat. She looked more relaxed than he'd ever seen her, and he guessed she probably rarely let her guard down, at least in her waking moments.

He stayed with her for a little while, then stood up, making to do the

dishes. El grabbed his hand, squeezed it, fighting to keep her eyes open.

"Mike?" She asked, softly.

"What about him?"

"Is he . . . is he okay?"

Hopper swallowed, nodded.

"He's safe."

The corners of her mouth twitched, and her eyes welled with tears.

"Can I see him?"

Hopper sighed, and squeezed her hand.

"Soon."

El nodded, satisfied, and dropped her hand. She closed her eyes, and her breathing slowed almost immediately. Hopper rubbed a hand over his forehead.

"Soon."

3. A New Normal

In the first few weeks, Hopper tiptoed around her, this girl called Eleven. It was slow going, at first. El wasn't like anybody he'd ever encountered in the entirety of his forty-four years. He couldn't pin her down.

She was a paradox. She was gentle and fragile and quiet, and yet hardened, fierce. She had the vocabulary and mannerisms of a small child, a toddler, and yet she contained a whole universe. She was shrouded in mystery and sheer *power*. She'd seen her fair share of terrible things, things most adults had never seen, never dreamed. She was mature in some aspects, yet she lacked the linguistics and the knowledge to express herself. She barely spoke, at first. She hovered around him, followed him wherever he went, but she never got too close. Never close enough to touch him. She flinched at sudden movements and loud noises, and she detested the dark.

She was incessantly curious. She asked question after question, and marveled at simple things, cassette tapes and batteries and coins. *What is that? What's it for? What are they doing? What does this mean?*

Hopper took off a couple days of work, and the day after Christmas, he drove El to the cabin. He opened the door, knocked the snow from his boots, and stepped over the threshold for the first time in several years.

El helped him clear away the heaps of junk and old furniture. Hopper marveled at her. He had a hard time digesting the fact that the girl in front of him could kill people without lifting a finger, yet she didn't seem to recognize a broom from toaster, didn't know the definitions for dustpan or bookcase or turntable. Hopper did his best to explain, and he hoped he did a half-decent job of putting things in a way that she could at least begin to understand, though he knew he was probably a lousy teacher. Lousy or not, she clung to his every word, eyes wide and earnest and *hungry*, soaking up every bit of knowledge he had to offer. Hopper was reminded, with a pang, of Sara, and her eagerness, the wonder with which she regarded the world and the stars and the stories in those books they used to read.

Hopper put a broom in El's hand and Jim Croce on the turntable, and they set to work. He helped her pull the old, dusty sheets off the mattresses and the moth-eaten drapes off the windows. He rerouted the electrical wires and the outlets, built up a fire, and taught her how to rig a trip wire. He brought lamps, appliances, and clean sheets from his trailer, filled the old refrigerator with orange juice and T.V. dinners and a six pack of Schlitz.

Soon, his grandfather's old cabin became something like home. He expressed this to El, and she looked at him, puzzled, tasting the word.

"Home?"

"Yeah. Home."

He set up a radio receiver, and taped up a cheat sheet, for Morse code, and tried to teach her simple dash-dot patterns, patterns for words like *coming* and *late* and *hide*, just in case. She picked it up quickly. She was intelligent, an incredibly fast learner.

On their third day at the cabin, he scribbled out the ground rules, the Don't Be Stupid Rules, and tried to express how important they were. She seemed to understand. He hoped she understood. God, he hoped. The chances of those government lunatics finding her, all the way out here, were slim. Still. He couldn't risk it.

He brought the T.V. from his trailer and set it up by the sofa. Hopper put on *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and she curled up on the opposite side of the sofa and watched, wide-eyed, interjecting with occasional questions. And he answered them. Before long, El began to nod off, and he shooed her to bed.

In the morning, as El padded down the hall to the kitchen, Hopper realized she was wearing the same overlarge clothes he lent her. She sat down for breakfast, and began shoveling scrambled eggs into her mouth.

"I have to go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Yeah. You need some clothes of your own." He said, reaching across

the table to tug at her sleeve. He finished the remaining scraps of bacon and dumped his plate in the sink. It was Sunday, and he wasn't expected at the station until later in the afternoon. He grabbed his wallet and keys from the kitchen countertop.

"I'll be back. Don't go outside. Remember our ground rules." He said, cocking an eyebrow. "Got it?"

"When?" El asked.

"What?"

"When will you be back?"

"Uh, gee, I don't know . . . in a couple hours?"

El glanced at the clock.

"One-three-zero?"

"One-thirty. Yeah, sure."

"Promise?" She said, tucking her knees up to her chest.

"Promise." He said, chuckling. He trudged out to his car, taking care on the icy parts of the walk, and scrapes the snow off his windshield.

At the department store, he rushed to the clothes section, selecting things at random. A blue sweater, a green hoodie, a couple of flannels, a gray sweatshirt, a pair of overalls. He threw it all into a shopping cart, and hurried to get some undergarments. He hesitated, grabbing a small, white bra. He sighed, then placed it in the cart.

He didn't quite get there, with Sara. God knew he was *not* ready for this.

He picked some warm socks, too, remembering El's bare toes, and a pair of new sneakers, guessing at the size. He grabbed a toothbrush and toothpaste. In the food section, he bought bread and milk and a bag of chips, and, after a moment's hesitation, a box of frozen Eggos.

He found El on the couch, watching Looney Tunes. Hopper drummed

his fingers on the doorframe.

“No more baggy sweatpants.” He said, and sat next to her. “No more gigantic sweaters.”

No more hospital gowns or borrowed dresses or stolen jackets.

He set the bag on the coffee table. El picked up the soft, green hoodie. She ran her fingers over the fabric, and pulled it over her head, humming contentedly.

“Warm.”

Hopper grinned.

“It’s about time you had some of your own, huh?”

He watched her pick up the other items, examine them, turn them over in her fingers. She liked to feel the fabrics. She was particularly attracted to soft things, colorful things. Anything, Hopper supposed, that wasn’t reminiscent of lab’s dull, cold hallways.

A week passed, and another. They were learning each other, slowly but surely. Hopper was learning to read her moods, her face, her eyes, filling in the blanks where she couldn’t tell him what she felt. Sometimes, it felt as if he could hold entire conversation with her, without speaking a word. Other times, he was tripping over sentences, trying to find the words and coming up with nothing but a few poorly phrased attempts, leaving her confused and frustrated. But they were learning.

Some days, Hopper brought her a book or a puzzle or the funny papers, something to keep her occupied in his absence. She finished the puzzles, took them apart, and put them back together again. She devoured the books, sounding out the words, and he filled in the ones she couldn’t pronounce. He dragged a chair into her room and sat by her bedside and read to her until she fell asleep at night.

They spent many hours in front of the T.V., watching the soaps and the classics and the Sunday cartoons. He caught her mouthing the words, sometimes speaking them aloud in tentative mimicry, experimenting, learning. She picked up some mannerisms, too, from

the actors, something he found amusing and, dare he admit, adorable. On one of her soaps, she watched a man sweep a woman in his arms and kiss her on the lips. She looked at Hopper, pointing at the T.V.

“What does it mean?”

“What?”

Lacking the words to express her question, she touched her lips, puckered them.

“Kissing?”

She nodded, staring at him. Hopper rubbed a hand over the stubble along his jaw.

“Uh, kissing is like . . . is like something people do when they love each other. It’s a like a hug, but with your mouth.” He said, face reddening, realizing how silly it sounded.

“Love?”

“Love? Love is what you feel when you really like someone. There’s different kinds of love. There’s family love, like how you love a mom or dad or brother and sister. There’s romantic love, between two people . . .” He reaches for words.

“Like a friend?” El said, softly.

“Like a friend, but . . . more.”

“More.” El echoed, smiling the tiniest of smiles, cheeks growing pink. Hopper chuckled. He looked at her, debating whether he should press her about it, and decided to drop the subject.

In the first few days, she was feverish and exhausted from her time spent in the cold and snow. She slept for long hours at a time. As the fever wore away and she adapted to a regular sleep pattern, the nightmares began. The onset was quick and unprecedented. He should’ve seen it coming, should’ve known that the trauma she suffered in the past would manifest in one way or another, that it

would claw its way into the new normal he'd carved out for the two of them. The nightmares came like a horde of demons out of the Satan's burning hell, *tap tap tapping* at the door, forcing their way into the light and safety of the cabin.

The first time, it nearly scared the living hell out of him.

Hopper woke to a terrible scream. A high, harsh shriek that seemed more akin to the cry of trapped, wounded animal than that of a twelve-year-old girl. He sat up, fumbling with the lamp, heart racing. He rushed into El's room, wearing a t-shirt and boxer shorts. He found El writhing in the bed, ensnared in the sheets.

"No!" She cried, gasping. "No!"

"El!" Hopper said, worriedly, and moved towards her. He shook her shoulder, attempting to peel away some of the blankets. She screamed, kicking and punching and clawing, fending him off.

"El, wake up. You're dreaming." He said, helpless.

"No! No!"

"El!" He yelled. Her eyes flew open, and she leapt back, pushing him away. Blood had begun to run from her nose. She looked around, wildly, trying to make sense of her surroundings, still trapped in some dark place he knew he couldn't reach. And it killed him, seeing her like that. She gasped, reaching for breath, still caught between the past and the present. She gazed into the shadows, staring at monster he couldn't see. Blood streamed down her face, staining the collar of her shirt. She gasped, snapping back into reality. She looked at him, hands clenching around the sheets, and burst into tears. She sat up, drawing her knees to her chest, and her whole body began to shake, violently. She covered her mouth with her hand and squeezed her eyes shut, sobbing.

Hopper swallowed, blinking back tears, and watched her shatter before his eyes. He took a seat on the edge of her bed and reached for her, pulling her onto his lap. She flinched, but didn't push him away.

"It's okay. You're safe. You're safe." He said, holding her to his chest,

cradling her head. She grabbed his wrist and held fast, so tightly her knuckles turned white. She wept, clinging to him like a lifeline, and he kept talking, not knowing what else to do. He'd heard of PTSD, he knew what it was. He knew that soldiers got it when they came back from war, and sometimes they had episodes, they got stuck in the past, that they had flashbacks where they couldn't hear or see anything happening in the present, only what was happening inside their head.

Somehow, he knew she needed to hear his voice. His words grounded her in the present, kept her from slipping back into that place, the dark place that existed inside her head. Or maybe it wasn't the words. Maybe it was something as simple as being *there* , after so many broken promises.

El pressed her face into his shirt, and he put an arm around her shoulders. His heart climbed into his throat, and he realized it was the first time she let him touch her, hold her, since that first night, when he brought her to his trailer.

After a while, her sobs subsided, somewhat. She quieted, and her breathing slowed, but she remained tightly coiled, squeezing his hand so tightly he doubted any blood was getting through to his fingers.

"It's okay, kid. You're safe. It was a dream." He said, glaring into the shadows. He stroked her soft, short hair. "It's not real. You're safe. I'm here."

She nodded, wiping at her eyes. She looked up at him, sniffing. She pointed to his shirt.

"Blood. Your shirt . . ."

Hopper looked down, at the smears of blood on his t-shirt. He shook his head, chuckling.

"It's okay, kid. It'll wash."

She gave him a small, teary smile, satisfied, and laid her head against his chest. Slowly, she uncoiled, muscles relaxing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hopper asked, after a while. El shook

her head, slowly. "Okay. You don't have to talk. You don't have to do anything." He said.

El nodded, still trembling.

"Do you think you can sleep?"

She shook her head.

"If I . . . If I sleep, they'll come b-back. The Bad Men. The monsters."

"What if I turn the light on? Will that help?"

El nodded. Hopper reached across the bedside and turned on the lamp, bathing the room in soft, yellow light.

"How about I read, for a bit?"

El nodded again. Hopper took a book off the shelf and opened it. He began to read, and she laid back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. After a couple pages, El's eyelids began to drop, and her breathing became deep and even. Hopper closed the book and stood, making his way towards the door.

"Stay?" She asked, thickly. Hopper paused, turned around. He looked at her, at the silent plea written in her face, and sighed. He returned to his chair, at her bedside. She held out her hand, and he took it in both of his.

"Sure, kid. I'll stay."

4. Sick

El's nightmares persisted. Each time she cried out, Hopper went to her bedside and held her, rocking her back and forth like a small child. He spoke small words of comfort, however empty, because he knew he couldn't hope to ever truly protect her from the monsters inside her head. And God, how he wished he could.

Sometimes they were really bad, and she woke up bleeding from her nose and her ears, shaking, locked in some terrible place until his arms and his voice called her back. She'd stay, curled in his lap, for hours afterward, weeping and whimpering. Dark stains grew under her eyes. He considered giving her sleeping pills and decided against it. He didn't like the idea of pills. They might mess her up even more. Best to wait it out. They'd get better, in time. Right?

Hopper was losing several hours of sleep a night, himself, and relied on coffee to get him through the day. He didn't let El have coffee, because the one time he did give her a sip from his mug, her books floated off the shelves, and the lamps began to flicker.

Hopper consistently arrived late to work, more often than usual, something that Flo had picked up on. She cornered him as he was gathering his things to leave and confronted him about it. He made the mistake of telling her it was "lady troubles" and he'd make a point of arriving on time. Within a span of two hours, everyone at the station was poking fun at this revelation. Even the trainee, Sullivan or Steele or whatever the fuck his name was, had the nerve to inquire about the "feminine influence" in his life, whatever the hell *that* meant. Hopper ignored them, shaking his head as he shut the door on Cal and Powell's whooping laughter and wolf-whistling. If only they knew.

Hopper continued to bring her games and books. He made a visit to the library and got her a Children's Encyclopedia, complete with glossy pages and color pictures. The book fascinated her, and she spent hours curled up with it, stocking toes tapping on the carpeted floor as she traced her fingers along the text, sounding out the words.

He brought her crosswords from the newspapers, and a couple action

figures from a yard sale. Keep her occupied, keep her entertained. Anything to keep her mind off the outside, to keep her mind off the Wheeler kid.

One day, Hopper worked up the nerve to visit his trailer, and dug around in his closet until he found the cardboard box, labeled "Sara". He swallowed, steeling himself, and opened it. Inside, he found a Rubik's cube, a stuffed bear, a couple board games, and Sara's copy of *Anne of the Green Gables*. A hard lump formed in his throat as he ran his fingers along the cover. Hurriedly, he shut the box and wiped at his eyes. He gathered the box in his arms and carried it out to his Blazer, setting it in the front seat.

At the cabin, he knocked, heard the click of the lock, and went inside. El was nowhere in sight, but music was blasting from the turntable, and he could hear her singing along.

"Hey, I brought you something!" He called, over the music. He watched the volume dial on the turntable shift off its own accord, and El came skipping out of her room, eyes alight.

"Puzzle?"

"Yeah. And some other stuff." He said, setting the box on the kitchen table. He pulled out the Rubik's Cube and placed it in her hands. She held it up, cocking an eyebrow.

"What . . . is it?"

"A puzzle. It's called a Rubik's Cube."

"A Rubik's Cube." El echoed, fascinated.

"Yeah. Try to match the colors. See? This side's already been solved." Hopper said, showing her the solid green side of the toy. "Try to solve the rest."

El began to fiddle with it, brows furrowing. Hopper watched as the pieces began to move on their own, switching around and reorganizing themselves until the damn thing was solved, every side a solid color. El held it up for his inspection. Hopper could only nod, encouragingly. She tossed the cube on the kitchen table, already

bored with it.

"Uh, I also brought a book. It's, uh, *Anne of the Green Gables*." He said, holding the book. She took it from his hands and flipped through the pages, looking up at him.

"Read?"

"Yeah, sure. We'll read for a while."

He sat down on the sofa, and she curled up next to him, laying a head on his shoulder. He inhaled, a little sharply, so unused to the strangeness of having someone so close, so affectionate and dependent, actively seeking his comfort. It felt . . . kind of nice. He ruffled her hair, which seemed to grow longer by the day, gaining a slight curl.

He opened the book and began to read.

"Mrs. Rachel Lyde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into the little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies' eardrops and traversed by a brook that had its source . . ."

He read until he could no longer ignore the growling in his stomach, and stood up to make them dinner. El took the book and opened it, stumbling her way through a couple sentences. She closed it, frustrated. Hopper shook his head, laughing.

"You'll get there, kid. Don't worry."

She was still working through her *Dick and Jane* books, the ones you use to teach little kids to read. This was a bit beyond her level.

"Promise?" She said, folding her arms. Hopper nodded, still grinning.

"I promise. Now, come help me cook dinner. I can't do all the work around here, you know."

She huffed, rolled her eyes, and got up to help him.

Hopper took her outside, sometimes, because he hated keeping her shut up in the cabin every single hour of every single day. They went

on little walks around their neck of the woods. He loved spending time outside, and he showed her the bushes where blackberries grew in the summer.

"Don't eat anything unless you're positive it's safe. Sometimes plants are poisonous."

"Poisonous?"

"Poisonous. If you eat it or touch it, you could get sick."

Hopper pointed out the birds in the trees, the squirrels and rabbits going about their business. On one such venture into the woods, they were lucky enough to spot a deer, a big stag. It paused, scenting the air, ready to bolt. El had been completely captivated by the animal. In all her time spent out here, in the snow, during that miserable month, she'd never seen one.

On a particularly cold night in early February, Hopper woke, not to a terrible scream, nor his alarm clock, but the sound of an awful, hacking cough. He groaned and rolls out of bed and made his way down the hall, rubbing sleep from his eyes. El sat up in bed with her hand pressed over her mouth. Hopper turned on the lamp and sat on the edge of her bed.

"Oh, no. What's the matter, kiddo?"

El just looked at him, helpless, disheveled and pale and exhausted.

"I think you're sick." He said, tiredly, laying his wrist across her forehead. She shivered, watching him with wide, glossy eyes.

"Yeah, you're hot. How do you feel?"

"Bad. Hurts. In here, and . . . and all over." She said, massaging her throat. Hopper put his arm around her, and she scooted closer to him, shivering.

"Okay, kiddo. It's okay. This is normal. You've been sick before, right?"

"Yes." She said, quietly. "In the bad place . . . gave me . . . bad stuff."

She said, and stuck out her tongue. "Gross."

"Medicine?"

She nodded.

"Okay. I'm afraid you might have to take some medicine again. That's the only way you'll feel better. I'll try to find some pills, instead, so you won't have to taste it." He told her, and got up. He went into the bathroom and rooted around in the medicine cabinet until he got his hands on a bottle of Tylenol pills. He also fished a thermometer out of the drawer, and returned to her room. He held up the thermometer.

"This is called a thermometer. It measures the temperature of your body, like how hot or cold you are. Keep it under your tongue." He said, and handed it to her. Tentatively, she lifted it to her mouth and stuck it under her tongue. Hopper nodded, forcing a smile. After a minute or two, he took the thermometer and held it to the light.

"One-hundred and two." He said, frowning. "That's a fever, alright."

"Fever." El echoed. Hopper pressed the pills into her palm.

"Don't chew them, just swallow them. Here, take a sip of water." He said, and handed her a glass. She obeyed, wincing as the pills went down.

Hopper went to the closet and heaped a couple extra blankets over her. She leaned back, gazing at him through half-closed eyes. Hopper returned to his place on the edge of the bed and took her hand. He ran his thumb over her knuckles, swallowing.

Out of the blue, a hard lump formed in his throat, looking at her, weak and fragile and bedridden. And he couldn't help thinking that the last time he had a kid laid up in bed, she didn't get better.

He swallowed, reaching for breath, feeling his chest tighten. His face must've betrayed him, because El's brow furrowed, and she squeezed his hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, kiddo. I just don't like seeing you under the weather, is all."

El's mouth twitched. She nodded, though she continued to study him, reading him, working something out.

Eventually, she fell asleep, still holding onto his hand. Sometime during the night, he fell asleep, too, and woke up on the carpeted floor, next to her bed. Grey light filtered through the window, throwing strips of light across the floor. Hopper stood up, groaning, cursing his sore back and the hard floor. The clock read 7:20 a.m.

El was still fast asleep. He pressed his hand to her forehead, and she stirred but didn't wake. The feel of her forehead against the soft skin of his wrist told him her fever had gone down, somewhat. Relief washed over him. He shuffled into the kitchen, fixing himself a cup of coffee, and picked up his walkie.

"Flo, you copy?"

"Chief?"

"Yeah, I'm not gonna make it in today. Urgent business."

"Alright, Hop." She sighed. "I'll call someone to cover."

"Thanks, Flo."

"You owe me."

El recovered, and she was well and on her feet in a matter of days. Things went on, as they always did. Hopper got up, made a pot of coffee and breakfast for the two of them, and went to work. He tried his best to get home on time. El watched her soaps and read her books and solved her puzzles, eager to learn and read and grow, to become something other than Experiment 011.

Hopper invented a new game, "Word of the Day". He bought her a dictionary, and he'd never seen her as excited as she was when she got her hands on that book. She flipped through it, scanning the pages, repeating words like *capricious* and *nostalgia* and *ornithology*.

As the days progressed, they progressed through Anne of the Green

Gables. Often, Hopper sat in the chair at El's bedside and read to her until she fell asleep. On one such occasion, El asked a question that nearly startled him right out of his chair. He answered her, hastily, evasively.

"Of course you have a mother. You couldn't have been born without one." Hopper replied, startled by the question.

"Where . . . where is she?"

"Uh, she's not around any more." He said, looking up from the pages.

"Gone?" She said, a ghost of the word, and his heart nearly fucking broke, just looking at her. At those eyes, big and brown, vast as the sky and the stars, the ocean. Eyes that had the power to take his heart and twist it, bend it, destroy it. Those eyes that contained so much pain and joy and sorrow and wonder—multitudes— it was a goddamn miracle, for one so small, so fragile.

And though she be but little, she is fierce.

"Yeah, she's gone." He said, stomach clenching under the weight of the lie.

He glanced at the book, swallowing. It was for the best, right? Terry Ives was the last thing she needed. He gazed at the girl, feeling a rush of blood sting his face, his ears. He bit his lip, cursing Brenner and every lunatic in that lab. Her eyes welled with tears, and a hard knot formed where his heart should be. His hands shook.

"I'm sorry about that, kid." He said, avoiding her gaze. He rubbed a hand over his face and ruffled the pages.

"And Father died four days afterward, from a fever . . ."

5. Constant

Constant *adjective*

1. occurring continuously over a period of time
2. remaining the same over a period of time
3. (of a person) unchangingly faithful and dependable

The third definition was of particular interest to her. She traced her finger along the words, saying them aloud. She glanced across the room, where Hopper slept, still in his uniform, stretched out on the sofa and bathed in lamplight. He snored, loudly, and the cabin seemed to tremble with each breath. She gazed at him, fondly, eyes tracing the wrinkles in his face, the crow's feet stretching from the corners of his eyes, the ones that turned up when he smiled.

Some of his wrinkles disappeared, while he slept, like he'd forgotten to put on a brave face. His walls came down.

It was something they had in common, the two of them.

Constant.

That's what he was, the big man, who rescued her from the cold and snow, who gave her clothes and food and a home. Home.

She'd never had a home, before. In the dictionary, a home is a *place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household*.

Family.

El supposed he was that, too. Family.

He cared. He taught. He made her dinner and bought her clothes, and when she woke screaming, from the bad dreams, he was there to hold her. He was constant. He *always* came back, accompanied by a secret knock and the scent of cigarettes. And sometimes, a puzzle or a book or a box of crayons. She enjoyed these things, but she enjoyed his company even more.

She liked it when they watched movies, when they danced around the kitchen to Bruce Springsteen, when he tickled the bottoms of her bare feet until she could barely breath for laughter. She liked his laugh, big and deep and rumbling. She liked it when he read in a different voice for each of the characters in the books he brought her. She liked it when he took her hands in his own, how he held her freezing fingers up to his mouth and breathed on them, warming them, and she could feel the stubble on his jaw scratching against her knuckles.

El set the dictionary aside and ran her hands through her hair absently. It had grown, over the past month. It was beginning to curl every which way.

El got up, took the blanket she'd been curled up under, and laid it across Hopper's sleeping form. She lingered, for a moment, looking around the cabin.

As much as she was glad to have a home, and Hopper, and all the Eggos in the freezer, she wanted *out*. She wanted to see the world she'd read so much about in those books he gave her. She wanted to see her friends. She wanted to see Mike.

Mike. She carried his face in her heart, a perpetual ache. She heard his voice, in dreams and nightmares, calling out to her.

El's eyes found Hopper's radio, on the shelf in the corner. She looked at it, swallowing, recalling Mike's supercom radio, how she could use it to find Barbara, and Will.

What if?

She crossed the room, took it off the shelf, and ran her fingers across the front, fiddling with the knob. She went to her room and shut the door, quietly. She sat on her bed, cross-legged, and switched on the radio. A song began to play, faintly, interrupted by short lapses of static. El skipped through the channels, until she found one relatively quiet, save for static. She took a breath, calling up an image of his face in her mind. The static skipped and wobbled, and she gave the radio a mental push, stretching the static over miles of sound and space . . .

No luck.

After a few minutes, she turned the radio off, frustrated. She looked around, worrying her lip, trying to think. In the Bath, it had been so dark . . .

She got up from the bed and dug around in her drawers she found a soft, cotton shirt, and tore the sleeve. She carried the piece of cloth over to the bed and tied it over her eyes, picking up the radio. She slumped back, against the pillows, pressing the device against her chest. She counted her breaths. One, two, three . . .

Maybe it was her mind, playing tricks. Unintelligible voices floated out of the radio, drowning out the static, and she felt herself sinking into that dark, lonely place.

She opened her eyes, looking down. She was standing in shallow water, surrounded by darkness. The In-Between. The Void. She held her breath, turning her head, straining her ears.

El?

"Mike?" She gasped, turning towards the voice. Her words drifted away, expanding in the vast, empty space.

It's been ninety-two days. I . . . I wish you were here.

And he was there, sitting in the fort. He held the SuperCom to his lips. Her heart fluttered in her chest, and she made her way towards him, slowly, afraid to chase him away.

"Mike?" She said again, and her voice trembled. She was a mere few feet away, now.

Will didn't come to school, today. I'm worried about him. We all are. He's . . . he's not the same. Things aren't the same anymore.

"Mike . . ." She knelt in front of him, tears welling in her eyes. He couldn't see her. His eyes, so deep and dark, stared straight through her. She wiped her eyes, sniffing, and reached out to touch him. She could almost feel him, his hands, his fingers.

I don't know what to do, El. Everyone just acts like nothing ever happened. And it's stupid, because stuff did happen. We all know it. And people pretend like you never existed, and it's just so stupid. El, you did exist. Everyone just wants me to forget, but I can't. I can't. You saved us. I can't forget. I don't want to. I don't know what to do. Tell me what to do.

Mike began to cry. He allowed his tears to fall freely, in that private moment of grief. El's whole body ached. She settled herself beside him, in the fort, and rested her head against his shoulder. She closed her eyes, trying to offer him some comfort, to take his pain away, despite the many miles between them.

El, I need to know you're okay. Tell me if you're okay. I know you're alive. And sometimes, I feel like I can feel you, I see you. Tell if you're here, El. Please.

"I'm here." She said, breathless.

El? El? Hello? Are you there?

"I'm here." She said, again. "I'm here, Mike. I'm okay."

El? El! Hello?

He began to yell. His voice grew fainter, clouded with static.

"Mike! Mike, I'm here!" She screamed, and grabbed his arm, but it dissolved beneath her fingers. He disappeared, and static filled her ears. She began to scream, calling his name.

He's gone he's gone he's gone he's gone

She sat up, wrenching the blindfold off her head. Blood streamed from her nose, and she didn't make any effort to wipe it away. She slumped forward, head pounding, and his voice echoed in her ears. She burst into tears, and she reached up to cover her mouth, stifling her sobs. She laid back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling, as world split in two and fell at her feet, and a distraught, freckled boy cried himself to sleep beneath a fort of blankets. She squeezed the soft skin of her forearm between her thumb and finger, making sure she was real, she was whole, she was there.

"When can I go outside?" El asked, at breakfast.

"What d'you mean? We went for a walk, yesterday." Hopper didn't look up from his toast.

"No. Outside. To see . . . friends." She said, choosing her words carefully. Hopper looked up, brow furrowing.

"It's not safe yet, kid. I have to talk to those people, the lab guys that took over after Brenner."

"Papa?" El said, feeling sick. She put down her fork.

"Yeah. Brenner." He said, darkly. "He's dead."

"Good." El said, and took a sip of orange juice.

"I have to talk to those guys, and once I think it's safe, you can see your friends."

"When?"

"I-I don't know, kiddo. Soon."

"How soon?"

"Soon." Hopper said, firmly, ending the conversation. He pointed to her plate. "Now, eat." El sighed, dramatically, and picked up her fork.

El made a habit of visiting Mike, in the evenings, puzzled and quite touched when she realized he found time to talk to her every single night, without fail. She sat in the fort, leaning against him, wanting to be near him, even if they existed in different planes. She listened to his voice and closed her eyes and willed the two of them into a universe where they could exist together, in the same place, without the danger of bad men or monsters.

She loved to hear him talk.

Her nightly visits lasted longer as she grew stronger. She stayed with him long after he stopped talking. Often, Mike curled up in the fort and fell asleep, and she laid down next to him, brushing the waves of hair out of his eyes, tracing the constellations of freckles on his cheeks.

And for once, her predicament in the cabin became bearable, so long as she got to visit Mike.

One night, Hopper burst into her room, wrenching her back to the present. He was in her face, shaking, yelling, almost in tears.

"Who are you talking to?" He bellowed, snatching the radio from her hands. She jumped, heart climbing into her throat, tears springing in her eyes.

"Mike." She spluttered, fearful. "I was visiting Mike."

"Visiting? Jesus, El. You can't talk to people. They'll find you! They'll take you back to the lab!" He yelled. El saw his hands shaking, saw tears in his eyes, and it scared her. She'd never seen him this upset.

He ran a hand through his hair.

"I wasn't talking to him! I was visiting! He can't hear me! He can't see me! He doesn't even know I'm there!" She screamed, through her tears. She fought for breath, covering her mouth with her hand. "Nobody's going to find me!"

She fell apart. She was hysterical, fighting for breath, grabbing fistfulls of the sheets, trying to keep herself steady. Hopper sighed, sitting at the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry." He said, quietly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled. I'm sorry, kid." He said, sniffing, wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

"Nobody's g-going to f-find me." She gasped, pressing her face into his chest. "Nobody's going to fine m-me."

"You're right, Ellie. Nobody's going to find you. I'll make sure of it.

Alright? I promise, no one's going to find you."

He fell silent, and El clung to him, listening to his heartbeat. Her sobs subsided, and she lifted her gaze, meeting his eyes.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't have yelled." He said, giving her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "You just scared me, is all."

El nodded.

"The Wheeler kid, huh? You were visiting. How?" He asked. El took the radio from where it fell onto the floor in Hopper's attempt to console her, and held it in her lap. She held up the blindfold.

"Like I found Will. And Barbara. Static. I can find Mike. I can listen. I can see him, but he can't see me." She explained. "It's like . . . it's like I'm a ghost." She said, frowning.

"And you're sure no one can hear you?"

El nodded.

"It's . . . it's all happening in . . . in here." She said, pointing to her head. "In my mind. In my . . . dreams."

Hopper nodded, rested his chin atop her curls.

"I guess it's okay, then. As long as no one can hear you and come looking for you."

"Yes. No one can hear me."

"Good."

"No one's going to find me." El said, again, wiping the tears from her cheeks.

Hopper nodded, brushing away a stray curl.

"I promise."

6. Growing Up

It was inevitable, really. And he should've expected it, should've seen it coming. Frankly, it never even crossed his mind.

With each passing day, she seemed to grow moodier, quick to snap or lash out, irritable and, sometimes, weepy. The day before, she dropped a plate, and it shattered on the tiles. She stared at it, going white, and burst into tears. He'd rushed across the room, afraid she'd cut herself or something.

"Are you hurt?" He demanded, inspecting her hands. She shook her head, wildly, tears running down her face.

"I b-broke it." She choked, staring at the mess. "I broke it!"

"It's okay, El. Really. It's just a plate." He said, puzzled. He held her while she cried, rubbing her back, wondering where on Earth this was coming from. He sat her down on the couch, then went and got a broom and swept up the ceramic shards.

She'd also taken to locking herself in her room, a lot. They fought a lot more, and there was a lot more slamming doors and raised voices. He figured it was just cabin fever. Being cooped up in here twenty four-seven was enough to drive anyone bonkers.

Anyway . . .

Warning Flag No. 1: mood swings. Case in point.

She'd also reached a healthy weight. When he found her in the woods, she was skeletal, all skin and bones and sunken eyes. She barely tipped the scale at eighty pounds, soaking wet. After a couple months on the Jim Hopper diet, which included, more often than not, doughnuts for breakfast and pizza for dinner, along with the amount of Eggos that kid consumed . . . she'd reached a healthy weight, alright. Her face was fuller, her hair took on a healthy shine, and her skin gained some color.

That morning, she complained about a stomach ache. Warning Flag

No. 2

He figured it was just the Eggo Triple Decker Extravaganza she'd had for breakfast, topped with chocolate chips and a generous heap of whipped cream.

He really should've seen it. All the clues were right in front of him.

He arrived home, that night, at seven-thirty on the dot. He stepped over the threshold, and his heart sank into the floor. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

She was nowhere to be seen. The T.V. was off. There were blankets heaped on the couch, the Encyclopedia open to a page on NASA. He could see the glossy pictures of space ships, Apollo 11 and whatnot.

"El?" He asked, fighting to keep his voice steady. No reply. He forced himself to take measured footsteps down the hall. He paused in front of her door, drummed a knuckle on the wood.

"El?"

"In here." A small, frightened voice, coming from the bathroom. His stomach tied itself in a knot. He approached the door, praying she wasn't having some sort of panic attack or flashback or something . . .

"El? You alright?" He asked.

"No."

"Can I come in?"

"No. Privacy"

"What's wrong?" He said, extremely worried, by now.

"Blood."

"Blood? You're bleeding? Are you hurt?" He said, jiggling the knob. Locked.

"Blood. Coming from . . . me. Stomach hurts." She said, voice muffled

through the door. And it dawned on him.

“Oh. Oh, El. That’s normal, for girls, your age.” He said, rubbing his mouth, mentally kicking himself. He could be so *clueless* sometimes. He should’ve thought about it, should’ve thought to tell her about it before it surprised her and scared her half to death, which is exactly what happened.

Real fine parenting, Jim.

“Normal?” El said, uncertain. “Yeah, it’s called puberty. It’s what happens to girls. It means you’re . . . you’re growing up.” He said, feeling awkward and stupid, trying to navigate this without confusing her even more. He wished he could call Joyce, because he was definitely the last person that should be helping El deal with this. Of course, that was definitely *not* an option.

“Puberty.” She echoed. “It hurts.”

“Okay. Here’s the deal. I’m gonna go get you some . . . stuff, that you’ll need.” He said, still talking through the door. Why don’t you change out of those clothes and get in the bath and wash up, okay? I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” She said, quietly.

And Hopper found himself standing in the Feminine Care aisle at the Supermarket, sweating through his shirt, staring at the shelves upon shelves of feminine products.

Why does there have to be so many different goddamn brands and sizes and . . . oh, screw it.

He picked up a small, pink box of pads, probably the simplest thing on that shelf, and rushed to the checkout line before anything in that aisle came to life and tried to eat him.

He sped home, running two red lights in the process, and found El on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, watching T.V. She’d been crying. He could see it on her face; her eyes were red and glossy.

“Hey, Ellie.” He said, hurriedly, and holding up the plastic bag. He

pulled out the box and handed it to her. She took it, frowning.

“Uh, they go in your . . . in your underwear, so the blood doesn’t stain your clothes. And it’ll happen every month, for about a week.” He explained. El frowned again, pressed a hand over her stomach.

“It hurts. Bellyache.”

“Oh, I can do something about that.” Hopper said, standing up. He rummaged in the cabinets for some painkillers, and dropped the pills into her palm. She took them, and he shooed her into the bathroom to break in that new, pink box.

When she emerged, he gave her a thumbs up, and she returned the gesture, corners of her mouth tilting upward.

“I’m sorry I let you deal with this on your own. It’s scary. I should’ve told you, before.”

“S’okay.” She said, quietly.

“Now, how about we watch a movie, huh?”

El nodded, eyes brightening. He ruffled her curls, then put an arm around her shoulders.

“I think it’s your turn to pick.”

7. Puzzle Pieces

Hopper walked through the hallways, one hand on the pistol at his belt, the other holding the flashlight, pointing the beam at the opposite wall. The halls seemed to go on, endlessly. There were no doors, no windows. As he wandered, a terrible fear clutched at his heart, and panic rose like bile in the back of his throat. His hands shook, and the beam of the flashlight dipped and danced, fretfully. His pace quickened, and his heart kept time with his footsteps, loud in his ears. He took a right turn, cursing, and the narrow corridor stretched out before him.

“Dad?” A voice asked, echoing, and Hopper stopped, pointing the flashlight’s beam around the hall, searching for the source of the voice. The voice was small and soft and achingly familiar.

“Dad?”

“Sara?”

Hopper said, suddenly hopeful, turning toward the voice.

There, standing at the end of the hall, was Sara. She waved, beaming, and ran to him. Hopper scooped her up in his arms and buried his face in her hair, holding her, and tears welled in his eyes.

“Daddy, you promised.” She said, pulling away, and tears streamed down her face.

“You promised.”

Hopper tried to speak, but his words caught in his throat. He watched, horrified, as the soft, pink dress she wore seemed to dissolve, replaced by a hospital gown. Her hair fell away, leaving a bald, scarred head. Her body grew thin, her face grew pale, and she slumped against him, wheezing, fighting for breath.

“Sara.” He choked, stroking her face. “Sara . . .”

His hands came away from her face slick with blood. He cried out, terrified, staring at the blood. He looked back at his daughter, but she was no longer Sara. Lying in his arms, bleeding profusely from her nose, was

El. She was pale and fragile, so sick, so weak. Her eyes fluttered, and she reached for him.

“You promised.” She mumbled, clutching his bloodied hand. “You promised.”

Hopper sat up, breathing heavily, trembling. He felt a warm wetness on his hands and looked down, horrified to discover both of his hands were covered in blood. His palms stung; he'd dug his fingernails into the skin of his palms, so deep they'd bled. He climbed out of bed, remembering the nightmare, suddenly queasy. He barely made it to the bathroom before he slumped over the toilet, heaving the contents of his stomach into the porcelain bowl.

When he was finished, he sat back, cradling his bloody hands to his chest. A cold sweat clung to his back and neck. When the nausea passed, he flushed the toilet and washed his hands in the sink. Hopper watched the water, tinged pink with his blood, slip down the drain. His hands continued to tremble. The cold, clammy sweat remained, accompanied by a terrible ache in his chest. Vaguely, he wondered if he was having a heart attack. He itched for a cigarette, anything to settle his nerves.

He made his way down the hall, paused outside El's door. He pushed it open, widening the crack, and peered inside. The image of her, weak and fragile and bleeding, flashed before his eyes. He bit his lip, shoving the memory into some deep, gnarled corner of his mind. No. She was safe, sound asleep. Her unruly mess of curls peeked over the edge of the blankets, which she'd pulled up almost all the way over her head.

Hopper sighed, relieved. He went into the darkened kitchen, glancing at the clock on the wall. 2:40 a.m. He grabbed his pack of cigarettes from the coffee table, and went outside.

Hopper leaned against the porch rail and pulled out a smoke, jamming it between his teeth. It trembled, and he chased the end with a lighter for a few moments. He took a long drag, staring into the dark wood beyond the cabin.

Again, the dream clawed its way to the surface of his mind, driving

dark images of endless, cold corridors and bloodied fingers, and the sound of his daughter's last, rattling breath. He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing the memory away, but it remained, seared into the backs of his eyelids, reverberating in his skull.

"You promised."

He could hear her voice. Familiar, and yet . . . alien. Accusatory, cruel. It echoed in his ears, over and over and over again. Hopper clamped his hands over his ears, and a strangled cry escaped his lips. He gritted his teeth, willing it to end, praying to God or whatever higher power to make it stop. He was shaking, and sweat ran down the side his face.

The phantom version of his daughter stood beside him, on the porch, glaring at him, her face cloaked in shadow.

"You promised, Daddy. You promised. You promised. You promised. You promised . . ."

"You're not real!" He yelled, voice breaking, clutching the rail to keep himself upright.

He broke his promise.

A couple weeks after Sara started Chemo, after she started losing hair, they shaved her head. She sat in a chair, and her toes barely brushed the floor. She was so small, even then, and the hospital gown she wore seemed to swallow her up. He held her hand in both of his, and she smiled at him, but something dark flickered in her face, obscuring the dancing, wondrous light that usually occupied those bright, blue eyes.

After it was over, and she'd put on that knitted, pink beanie to keep out the bitter, November air, they went to get ice cream at the Ben and Jerry's on the corner. They sat on the brick wall, outside, eating their triple decker sundaes. Sara went on and on about the different constellations she'd learned about in that picture book, pointing out the general direction of Jupiter and Venus.

"When did'ya get to be so smart?" Hopper said, and kissed her

forehead. She giggled, still nursing her sundae. She looked at him, and her eyes filled with tears.

“What’s wrong, Kiddo?” Hopper asked, taking her hand.

“I’m scared.” She said, quietly.

“Oh, hon.” Hopper said, and pulled her into his lap. She leaned her head against his shoulder, sniffing, clutching fistfuls of his jacket.

He promised her, then. He promised her she’d get better. He promised her he wouldn’t let anything happen to her.

Some promises can’t be kept.

He heard the door’s hinges squeal, and the creak of the wood planks underfoot, and a small hand took up residence in his larger one. He looked down, into El’s large, brown eyes, gazing up at him.

“Hey, Kid.” He sniffed, giving her hand a squeeze.

“Hey.” She said, quietly. Tentatively, she touched his cheek. Hopper realized he’d been crying, and wiped at his eyes, furiously.

“You’re sad.” She said, simply, looking at him. Hopper nodded, avoiding her gaze.

“Want to talk?” She asked.

“I . . . I just had a bad dream, that’s all.” Hopper said, and forced a smile. “I’ll be fine.”

“I understand.” She said.

“You should get back to bed, Kiddo. I’ll be fine, really.”

“No.” El said, firmly, shaking her head. “Stay.”

El leaned her head against him, gazing into the shadow and trees. Hopper put an arm around her shoulders and took a long, deep breath.

She wasn’t Sara, but he saw so much of Sara when he looked at her,

when he listened to her talk. Some of her mannerisms, her curiosity, reminded him so much of his daughter that he'd stop, dead in his tracks, for a moment, trying to gather his bearings. Hopper reprimanded himself, reminding himself again and again and again.

El isn't Sara. Sara's gone, and nothing's going to bring her back.

And El needed him. She was broken, already. She didn't need another broken soul. Hopper tried his best to be there, to be present and whole. God, he tried. He hoped it was enough. He was still broken, but . . . less. Because of her. Because El seemed to fill that empty space inside him, just a little.

If he was a jigsaw puzzle, Sara was the missing piece, and El was the piece you found under the couch, from an entirely different puzzle entirely, but weirdly, *miraculously*, it seemed to fit.

After Sara, he still saw her. Turning the pages of that picture book about space, chasing butterflies in the woods outside his trailer, sitting on the brick wall outside Ben and Jerry's, sprawled in the grass, gazing at the stars. For months, he spent his days chasing a ghost. And then he realized that's exactly what she was, a ghost, and he started smoking again and somewhere along the line, he and Diane split, and it was back to Hawkins, back to the shithole where he grew up. Back in Hawkins, living in a shabby, old trailer by the lake, bringing home nameless, faceless women, drinking in bars between shifts, smoking a pack a day, to forget.

There's a catch, though. He couldn't forget. Not really. Not when he finally sobered up, lying next to a nameless, faceless stranger, and the world was quiet, for once, that he remembered. Sara. His kid. His girl. Gone.

And then the universe shuffled his cards, and a brown-eyed, curly-haired, Eggo-loving enigma forced her way out of Hawkins Lab and into his life.

Congrats, Jim. This is your life, now.

El took his hand and squinted, brow furrowing.

"Hurt." She said, tracing the marks his fingernails left in the skin. They'd begun to bleed again. He hadn't noticed.

"It'll be okay, they're not deep."

"Wait." El said, and went back into the house. When she returned, she was carrying the little first aid kit he'd bought. Carefully, she extracted some gauze bandages from the little, plastic box. She held his hand and wrapped the bandage around it, carefully, painstakingly. When she'd finished with one hand, she did the same to the other.

"There. Better." She said, and smiled. He smiled, too.

"C'mon, El. We should go inside, it's too cold." He said. She yawned, nodded. He scooped her up and carried her back into the house, back to bed. He set her down on the blankets, and made to leave.

"Read?" She asked. As she spoke, the Judy Blume book they'd been working through floated off her shelf and landed in his hands. He sighed, chuckling.

"Alright. A couple pages."

Hopper took a seat in his designated chair and opened the book. El yawned, fighting to keep her eyes open, watching him through half-lidded eyes.

After a while, she lost the battle and drifted off. Hopper closed the book, got up from his chair, and pulled the blankets up to her chin. He turned off the lamp, and paused in the doorway.

This is your life. And, really, is it so bad?

Not bad. Not bad, at all.

8. Joyce and Jim

Hopper pressed the heels of his palms over his eyelids, trying to soothe the pounding in his temples. He was exhausted, from his late night terror. The pile of papers on his desk grew steadily larger, it seemed. He had a fair number of messages on the receiver, and Flo breathing down his neck, and a broken file cabinet that needed fixing. Hopper dropped his hands and picked up the folder on the top of the pile, then set it down again, chewing on the inside of his cheek. He wasn't in the mood to deal with Mr. Larson's missing garden gnomes, nor the stupid teenagers that graffitied the high school gym, or the broken pipe on Main.

Hopper picked up his mug of coffee and took a sip, contemplating going outside for a smoke, gazing at the strips of sunlight that fell across the surface of his desk and across the floor of his office. He picked up the phone, fumbling with the buttons around his bandaged palms, and began to listen to the first message. He stopped halfway, groaning. It was one of those days where the tiniest shred of motivation escaped him, and all he really wanted to do was go home, take off his shoes and unbutton his uniform, and relax. Maybe he and El could watch a movie, or work on the new puzzle. They were almost done with Judy Blume. He knew she was itching to finish it.

Hopper's mind wandered to Will; he hadn't spoken to Joyce for a long time — too long, after all they went through — and he hoped they were getting on alright. He'd seen Will a few times after he came home from the hospital, once around Christmas and another in January. Now, it was late March, and God, he hoped the kid was okay. Nothing would go back to the way it was, before. You didn't come out of something like that without a scratch, but he hoped Joyce and her family found ways to live with the scars.

Before he fully registered what he was doing, he'd dialed Melvald's General Store. He held the phone to his ear, worrying his lip.

"Melvald's General Store. This is Joyce, how can I help you?" She said, politely, on the third ring.

“Hey, Joyce. It’s Jim.” He said, smiling in spite of himself.

“Hop! How’re you doing?” She said, and the surprise in her voice was evident, even on the phone.

“I’m calling to ask you the same question.” Hopper said.

“Oh! I’m alright. I’m doing just fine, Hop, really.”

Hopper swallowed.

“Joyce, I . . .” He paused, hesitant. “Can I bring you lunch?”

“I’m off at two.”

And Hopper found himself sitting on the hood of Joyce’s Pinto outside of Melvald’s as they ate sandwiches and drank root beer, like a couple of teenagers. Joyce looked at him, smiling.

“How’s Will?” Hopper asked, sipping his root beer.

“Better. He’s quiet. Quieter than usual, and moody. He gets nightmares a lot.” She looked at him, frowning.. “He doesn’t eat nearly enough and he doesn’t get nearly enough sleep. But he’s getting better. Thank God for those friends of his, Hop. They never leave him alone. He’s happy, when he’s with them. It’s the only time I ever see him smile, when he’s with those kids.”

“Wheeler?”

“Yeah, and Sinclair and the Henderson boy.” Joyce said. Hopper nodded, fighting the pang of guilt that creeps up his throat like bile. El’s friends. She wouldn’t shut up about Wheeler, and Hopper knew that Dustin and Lucas, those kids, they’re her friends, too.

Joyce took his hand, tracing her finger along the bandage.

“What happened?”

“Oh, I-I uh, I burned myself, taking a pan out of the oven. It’s nothing.” He said, and she frowned.

"I didn't know you could cook." Joyce said, cocking an eyebrow. She smiled, mischievously.

He chuckled, looking at her. And his heart fluttered, a little, in his chest. He looked away, reminding himself that he was nearing his late forties and he was definitely *not* in the position to start something with Joyce Byers, nor had he ever been good at serious relationships. He blames the split with Diane on Sara's death, because that's what most people do, when they lose their kids. They split up.

It was his fault, too. He'd seen his fair share of horrible things, being a cop in a big city, and the drinking and the cigarette and the pills certainly didn't help their relationship.

It wasn't like he was past all that. He still drank one too many beers sometimes, he couldn't bring himself to quit the damn cigarettes, and the terrible, awful things he'd witnessed over the course of forty-something years played behind his eyes like a roll of film every time he closed them.

And he had a kid, now. A kid that needed every spare minute he had to offer. A kid that needed more love and attention than he could ever hope to give her. But goddamnit, he'd try.

They'd dated, for a while. In high school. Dated or screwed around or whatever you want to call it. They shared cigarette between periods and made out in the back of his car and did all that shit that came with being a dumb, horny teenager. And he supposed he did have a thing for her, back then. And maybe it never really went away.

But here they were, having lunch on the hood of her car. A couple of dumb kids. Scratch that. A couple of broken people who'd seen too many horrible things, who'd been through hell and back, who'd been dragged through shit they had absolutely no control over, who'd seen too much bad and not nearly enough good. A couple of people plucked out of the ringer, dusted off, and thrown together again under shit circumstances. Glass people in a paper town. Yeah, a pair of star-crossed lovers if he ever saw one.

He wasn't about to start something with Joyce Byers. He was just too fucked up. And he had enough shit to deal with, anyway.

Right?

Joyce's smile slid from her face, and she squinted at him, as if she knew the nature of the thoughts racing through his mind, a mile a minute. She bit her lip, staring at her half-eaten ham sandwich.

"Do you remember Bob Newby? He went to school with us."

"Bob the Brain?" Hopper said, incredulously. Vaguely, he remembered the kid.

"Oh, stop. Yeah, Bob. I, uh, I've been seeing him. For a couple weeks, now. And I-I think . . . I think he'll be good, for Will. And Jonathan." She stammered, not looking at him. "I think he's good, for us."

"That's great." Hopper said, hoarsely. And he meant it. Because he was too broken, already. Because Joyce deserved all the good in the world, after what she'd been through.

Joyce looked at him, and smiled. She nodded, to herself. Hopper smiled, too.

"That's really great, Joyce. I'm glad."

The smile disappeared from her face, again. She squinted, gazing across the street.

"Eleven." She said, softly.

"Hm?" Hopper said, startled. Joyce sniffed.

"Eleven. The girl, the one that helped us save Will. Do you . . . do you think she's still out there?"

Hopper swallowed, wanting so badly to tell her.

No. No risks. If he couldn't follow his own rules, how could he expect El to do the same? She made herself sick in front of that T.V. screen. He listened to her cry, at night. Listened to her mumble the Wheeler's kid's name in her sleep. Sometimes, she screamed it. During nightmares and flashbacks. She screamed the boy's name, and it broke his heart. He wished he could give that to her. That freedom.

He wished she could see the Wheeler kid. For real. Face to face. But it would be breaking the rules. It wasn't worth the risk. And neither was confiding in Joyce. It was too early, too dangerous.

"I don't know." He said, fighting to keep his voice even and steady. Joyce swallowed, and her eyes filled with tears.

"She saved my boy, Hop. She saved us all. I just . . . I wish I could return the favor."

Hopper shook his head.

"It's too dangerous, Joyce."

She nodded, and fell silent.

Joyce invited him back to her house for a drink and a cigarette, and he obliged. They sat at the kitchen table, going through a pack of Camels, just talking. Talking about everything and nothing at all. Jonathan's college plans; old teachers; Diane's new baby; the holidays. And they pretended like everything was normal, for once. Like they didn't come back from actual, literal hell. Like they weren't invaded by an interdimensional monster just four months ago.

The front door flew open and Hopper started, hand jumping to the pistol in his belt.

"Dude, what are you even talking about? I fucking beat you at Dig Dug, so shut your fat mouth!"

"Uh, but I beat you at Pac-Man and Space Invaders."

"Oh, shit all over that, Henderson! The only reason you beat me at Space Invaders is because I was distracted!"

"Distracted? You mean too busy staring at that chick's ass? Yeah, real classy, man."

"Shut up!"

Henderson and Sinclair barreled through the doorway, closely followed by Will. The Wheeler kid brought up the rear. His hands

were shoved deep inside the pockets of his hoodie, and he watched his feet, not joining in the conversation. Hopper looked at him, breath catching his throat, totally taken aback by the complete change in the boy. He looked thinner, if that was even possible, because the last time Hopper saw him he was already skinny. His face was paler, and drawn, and dark circles stained his under eyes. He looked to be operating on dead batteries. Fragile and exhausted and broken. Lost.

“Mom, can Mike, Dustin, and Lucas stay for dinner?” Will “Hey, Chief.”

“Hey, Kid.”

“I guess it’s fine, honey. Do their parents know?” Joyce says, ruffling his hair.

“Yeah, we used the pay phone at school.”

“Alright. Did you have a good day?”

“Yeah.” Will said, and forced a smile.

“You’re sure?” Joyce asked, squinting.

Will nodded, then took off, joining his friends. The kids trooped down the hall, and a door swung shut, muffling Henderson and Sinclair’s fervent argument.

Hopper snuffed out his cigarette and stood, glancing at his watch. He told El he’d be home by six. He was already a couple minutes late.

“I should get going, Joyce. It’s good to see you.”

“You too, Hop.”

In the Blazer, he picked up the radio and signalled. L-A-T-E.

Late.

He arrived at the cabin at 6:24 p.m. He stepped over the tripwire and climbed the porch steps, knocking.

The locks clicked, almost immediately, and he stepped inside. El sat on the couch, tossing a rubber ball against the wall without lifting a finger. It bounced, toward her, and she threw it again, with a tilt of her head. The rhythm of the ball against the wood panelled wall reverberated through the cabin.

“Impressive.” He commented, kicking off his shoes.

“You’re late.” She replied, not looking at him.

“Yeah, only a couple minutes.”

“Two-six minutes.”

“Twenty-six minutes.” He corrected her, gently.

“Twenty-six minutes.” She echoed. She flicked her head, again, and her curls bounced. The ball hit the wall and shot straight back, toward her.

“I’m sorry, Kid. I lost track of time. I was with Mrs. Byers.”

“Will’s mama?” She asked, curiously, and let the ball fall to the floor, where it landed with a weak *thud* and rolled away.

“Yes.”

“How . . . how is he?”

“He’s doing okay, kiddo.”

El nodded, mouth twitching.

“Good.”

Hopper went into the kitchen, and El followed him, all resentment toward him apparently forgotten. She stared at him, eyes light.

“I’m hungry.”

Hopper smiled.

“Me too, kiddo.”

“Eggos.” She said, simply.

“No. Dinner first, then Eggos.”

“Rule?”

“Yes. That’s a rule. You can’t live off of Eggos.”

“Why?”

He laughed. A great, booming laugh.

“For the same reason I can’t live off of doughnuts and Schlitz. Set the table, will you?”

9. Missing You

El winced, cradling her hand. A thin papercut stretched across the pad of her thumb. It immediately began to bleed. El jumped up, letting her book fall to the floor, and raced to the kitchen. She grabbed a paper towel and pressed it over the cut, staunching the flow.

She glanced around the cabin. Her whole body was stiff, from sitting for so long, and her breath felt sticky in her throat. She began to feel sick, just looking at the walls.

She remembered the first time she saw the cabin, how *big* it felt, how much space it contained. Now, it felt small. Too small. As small as the room Papa used to send her to, when she was bad.

She sucked in a breath, balling up the paper towel. She went to the bathroom, in search of a Band-Aid. She peeled the wrapper and wrapped it around her thumb, then returned to the sofa. She picked up her book, then put it down, sighing.

Boredom had afflicted her a lot, lately. At first, the cabin was a new world entirely. And she spent her days exploring every inch of it, with her eyes and her hands, running her fingers over the various fabrics and surfaces, the grain of the wood table; the worn, cotton bed sheets; the soft, fleece blanket; the old, squashy sofa. She picked up the knick-knacks and appliances and unfamiliar objects, eager to learn their names and functions.

In the lab, she only knew the stiff mattress and cold sheets of her bed, the small stuffed animal, the small plant Papa gave her, occasionally some crayons and paper. Here, she favored a whole new set of wonders: thick, wool socks and books with folded, crinkled pages and and a large, plump teddy bear without an eye.

Now, these wonders had lost their magic, and all El could really pay any attention to was the ticking clock, counting the minutes. And the hands didn't move fast enough.

She got up, walking the length of the room. The large, stuffed elk

head on the wall stared at her with blank, unseeing eyes.

Her body was hyper-sensitive, alive with pent-up energy. She was simultaneously exhausted and invigorated. She took up using her abilities to relieve some of the jitters, and it helped, some. But not enough. She was growing stronger. She knew. She could perform fairly arduous tasks without so much as a headache, nor a bleeding nose.

El sat back, in front of the T.V., and pulled the blindfold from her sweatshirt pocket. She found a channel without any activity, only static, and tied the cloth around her head. She knew Mike would be at school, now. It was 10:30 on a Tuesday morning. She'd visit him, anyway.

It took her longer than usual to find him. She had to pick her way through the tangle of voices surrounding the school. She drifted through the conversations, floating, until she came to him. He sat in a plastic chair, amidst the darkness of the Void, bent over his desk, doodling on his paper. She approached him, curious, heart aching a little. She leaned over him, hand resting on his shoulder, and peered down at the paper. He was sketching out a map, she guessed, for the game they used to play. Dungeons and Dragons. She smiled, and her fingers tightened on his sleeve. He stiffened, eyes widening. Slowly, tentatively, he moved his hand and placed it over her fingers. She could almost feel him, for a second. And for a second, she thought maybe he could feel her. Mike shook his head, frowning, and returned his attention to the map in front of him. He began to dissolve.

El ripped the blindfold off her head and leaned back, feeling the familiar trickle of blood staining her upper lip. Her breath got all caught in her throat, heavy and hard, and she felt like crying.

It was torturous, really, to be so close to him, yet so far away. And he dangled out of her reach, like the words to a forgotten song that dance on your tongue, like the approval, the love, she always sought from Papa. Just out of reach.

It hurt her more than anything else.

She'd stay locked in this cabin for a thousand days, a thousand years, if it meant she could see him, touch him, hold him. Just once.

Words were held in high value, with El. And Mike gave her the most important words of all. *Friend* and *promise* . And love.

In the fort, during his nightly calls, his walls came down, and he poured his heart into that radio. He cried himself to sleep, wrapped in those blankets. It had been a hundred and twenty-two days, and he hadn't forgotten to call her, on the Supercom. Not once.

If that wasn't love, she didn't know what was.

And El knew the way her heart swelled, the way it fluttered and trembled, when she heard his voice. The way she felt a dull ache, somewhere in her chest and in her stomach. The way she struggled for oxygen, got a little dizzy, when she thought about him, when she visited him. When she recalled what it felt like to hold his hand, when she thought about kissing him, like the people on television. Like he kissed her, the night she lost him.

If that wasn't love, then she didn't know what was.

El got up and went into the kitchen, looking for snacks. She took the jar of peanut butter out of the cabinet and ate it with a spoon, straight from the jar. She glanced at the clock, again.

She went to the couch and curled up with a blanket, frustrated and aching. She watched her reflection in the blank T.V. screen, running her hand through her hair, absently. Eventually, she fell asleep.

When she awoke, the cabin was dark. The clock read 7:03 p.m. She'd been asleep for a long time. And Hop was an hour late. She groaned, rubbing a hand over her eyes.

He arrived late more and more often. Almost every night, these days. And El couldn't help worrying about it, worrying that someday he'd leave, and he wouldn't come back. She shuddered at the thought, because she'd come to like him, to love him, as a daughter would love a father.

She knew there were lines and limits, and tension. Something had

happened to him, something that made him sad, that made him . . . *afraid* of her. Afraid to get too close. And it made her sad.

They'd watch movies and she'd lean against his side and trace her fingers over his hands, rough and calloused and larger than her own, and she'd fiddle with the little blue, braided band he always wore around his wrist. She asked him about it, once, and "it belonged to someone I knew" was his only reply.

"Gone?" She'd asked, because something had shifted inside him. And she could feel the anguish, the grief, in the air around him, in the way his hand tightened, almost imperceptibly, around her own, like he was reassuring himself she was really there, that she was real.

"Yeah," he said, roughly. "Gone."

She knew he wasn't her father, knew he probably didn't love her like he would love a daughter. But, sometimes, when he held her in his arms and comforted her when she cried, when he tousled her curls, when he surprised her with Eggos or sweets or a new book, when he took her hands and spun her, barefooted, around the kitchen to the tune of the "Sh-Boom", it felt like he did love her. Like a father would love a daughter. And he was so different from Papa, so much better. Softer and warmer and kinder.

If he didn't come back, she didn't know what she'd do.

But he always came back, late or not. She had to remind herself almost every day. He always came back. Even if he forgot to signal. And her breath would hitch and her lungs would constrict, she'd worry her lip, unable to stop her mind from running wild with terrible, awful thoughts. That he'd gone, for good. That he'd sold her out, to the bad men. That he'd forgotten her, left her.

He always came back. And for that, she could forgive him.

10. Breakdown

"Shit!" El swore, wrenching her hand away from the pan. She lifted her burned thumb to her mouth and sucked on it. Hopper glanced across the room, suppressing a smile at the sight of her, covered in pancake batter. It was on her nose and in her hair, clumping in her eyebrows and staining her flannel. She struggled with the pan, still wincing.

"What did we talk about, El? Watch your language."

Living with Hopper meant she'd acquired a, well, colorful vocabulary. The first time Hopper caught her swearing, he nearly pissed himself he laughed so hard. He tried to explain, through his laughter, that swearing was "wrong" and "unladylike" and "just because I said those things doesn't make it okay". It wasn't the first time she'd heard those words. All those kids she used to hang out with, Wheeler and Sinclair and Henderson, they all had foul mouths, too.

Apart from the Don't Be Stupid Rules, Hopper tried to establish other rules, and boundaries. He reinforced stuff like don't talk with your mouth full and say "please" and "thank you" and eat your peas. That one was a particular favorite; El despised peas.

Hopper figured he'd add swearing to that list, as well.

"Shoot." She said, matching his glare.

Hopper nodded, satisfied, and helped her scoop the pancakes onto a plate. They were a little burned around the edges, and a little lopsided, but they'd do. Hopper smiled, spotting her attempt to make a Mickey Mouse shaped pancake.

"You did good, kid." He said, putting butter and syrup and whipped cream on the table. El sat down, grabbed the whipped cream, and piled it onto her pancake.

"Hey, hey, that's enough." He said, snatching the whipped cream from her hands. She glared at him, and grabbed her fork, stabbing the pancake.

"What're you going to do today?" He asked. He'd been asking her that question a lot, lately, mostly out of guilt. He resented leaving her more and more. He could tell the confinement was taking its toll on her. She was bored, all the time. Sometimes she never even left her room, never even got out of bed. She slept for long periods of time, during the day, and woke several times a night, screaming at things inside her head. She hardly had an appetite, some days. He knew she needed sunlight and exercise and company. She needed to get out. She needed to see those kids. Wheeler, especially.

Tensions were high, too. She got annoyed extremely easily, about the smallest things. She snapped at him, threw fits. She was testing her boundaries, too. He knew. And the more she threw fits, the more he yelled, and the more he felt so terribly guilty.

So he asked, to make sure she was occupying herself. To make sure she was still with him. Because he knew she was showing at least four or five signs of clinical depression, knew she was losing a little bit of herself, every day she stayed here. He knew it wasn't fair, keeping her locked up like some animal. But what choice did he have, really?

"Nothing." She snapped, moodily, not looking up from her plate.

"Nothing?" He asked, frowning. "You gotta do something. How about a puzzle? A movie?"

She shook her head, furiously.

"There's nothing to do. Boring."

He sighed. She looked at him, finally.

"Go outside?" She asked, in a voice so quiet and wistful he thought his heart might break in half.

"No, El. You know we can't risk it." He said, almost pleading with her. "I'm sorry."

He watched her nibble at her pancake, taking a few bites, then push it away.

"I'm not hungry."

"El, you gotta eat."

"Not hungry." She said, again.

Hopper reached for his knife and knocked over his coffee mug, spilling the stuff all over his lap.

"Fuck!" He yelled, jumping up.

"Watch your language." El mumbled, mockingly, shooting him a look. Hopper rolled his eyes, grabbing a napkin.

"Yeah, I guess that's two dimes for the swear jar."

"Swear . . . jar?"

"Swear jar." He repeated, thinking it might not be such a bad idea. God knew the kid had a foul mouth. And if she didn't talk much, a good percentage of the words that came out of her mouth were filthy. "You get a jar, and every time you curse, you have to put money in it. Like a bank." He explained. She knew about banks. He'd taught her about money, explaining dimes from dollars and what you could buy with what, what a bank was and what taxes were and the concept of interest. She was fascinated.

El nodded.

"It's incentive, to stop swearing. That can be your word for the day. Incentive. Do you know what it means?"

El shook her head, slowly. Hopper paused amidst the business of cleaning the spilled coffee off the table.

"Incentive is like . . . motivation, for doing something. It's like encouragement. It can be good, or bad. In this case, it's bad. You don't swear because you want to avoid losing your money. Understand?"

"Yes." El said. Hopper shot her a look.

"Yes, I understand." She said, exasperatedly. He'd been encouraging her to speak in full sentences, lately. Redirecting her one-word questions and answers into complete phrases. It was helping. Sort of.

"Alright. I have to go, El. Don't go outside. Eat something decent for lunch, okay? Not just Eggos and pudding and whatever other crap. I'll be home by five."

"Promise? You're always late."

"I'll be home by five." He said, firmly. "I promise."

"Fuck." He said, checking his watch. Five-thirty. Late.

He grabbed his keys, bid Flo and Cal a hasty goodbye, and sped off in his Blazer. At the cabin, he pounded on the door. The lock clicked, and he stepped inside. A certain, telepathic teenager was nowhere to be seen.

The T.V. had been dragged into the room. Hopper followed the cord over to her bedroom and knocked on the door. No response. The T.V. wasn't even on. The house was silent and still. He tried the doorknob. Locked.

"El, open up. I'm sorry, Ellie."

No response. No sound.

"El? El, open up. Please."

Nothing.

Hopper began to panic. He slammed his palm on the wood, throwing his shoulder against it, yelling and screaming, hoping to dear God that she hadn't done something, hadn't hurt herself . . .

"El, open up! I'm going to break down this door. El? El!"

The lock clicked, and relief flooded through him.

He found El inside, curled in the farthest corner of the bedroom. She had her knees tucked up to her chest, and her arms hugged around her sides. She met his gaze, in the darkness, and Hopper's stomach twisted, unpleasantly.

Something was extremely, horribly wrong.

"El?" He said, gently. "El, are you okay?"

"You promised."

"What?"

"You're late."

"I'm sorry, El. I . . . I lost track of time. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you." He said, taking slow, measured steps toward her. There was something . . . off. In her eyes, in her voice. Removed, like she wasn't really there. Like she was somewhere else.

In that place.

Her lip quivered, and she shook her head, eyes filling with tears.

"You promised." She repeated, voice empty and distant. She sniffed, and stared at the ground, avoiding his gaze. "You promised."

"El . . ."

She screamed, a horrible, agonizing scream, and Hopper wondered how such a sound could come from her. It was full of so much grief, so much raw emotion and pain. It ripped through his heart, twisting the knife deeper and deeper, into the scarred, gnarled, broken parts of him.

"You promised. You promised. You promised!" She was screaming now, drawing into herself, clamping her hands over her ears. Hopper dropped to the ground beside her, aching, every nerve in his body hypersensitive and tingling. The hair on the back of his neck trembled and stood up, and sweat clung to his neck.

"El!" He called, reaching for her. An invisible force hit him square in

the chest, sending him flying backward, against the wall. Something held him there, against the wooden panels, reaching for breath. Something kept him, frozen, watching her break. She was screaming, sobbing, and he couldn't really make out what she was saying. Blood streamed from her nose. The lamp on her bedside table flickered.

This wasn't a nightmare, nor was it a tantrum. It was something in between, a complete breakdown. This was weeks, months, of something bursting out of her, shaking the ground, rattling his bones, calling up monsters from the shadows.

She was hurting, breaking, and she needed him and he couldn't fucking move. He struggled against the telekinetic force overwhelming him, yelling for her. And she turned and stared at him, and something in her eyes scared him half to death. She looked at him like he was another monster, from the nightmares. From that place.

And then the force was gone, and he slumped, a little, taking a breath.

"El . . ." He pleaded. Her screams turned to quiet weeping, and he crawled toward her.

"El." He said, again. Her name became a prayer, on his tongue.

He touched her shoulder, and whatever strength left her. She slumped against him, and he held her, cradling her in his arms. She grabbed fistfuls of his shirt, sobbing, and her entire body was rigid, stiff as a stone soldier. Her knuckles were white as bone, her face whiter. And it all came tumbling out, fear and grief and anger and confusion, all forcing its way out, rearing its ugly head.

He held her, while she cried. And she poured everything onto his shoulders, sobbing. A small eternity passed, and he rocked her, speaking, trying to soothe her.

He liked to think he knew where this was coming from, knew it wasn't fair to keep her locked up like this. Knew she was coming to view the cabin, not as a home, but as a prison. And he knew she needed structure, and control. And freedom, most of all. God knew

she'd been locked in small rooms her entire, short life.

He couldn't even begin to imagine it, though. What it was like, in that lab. Being poked and prodded and tested and punished, called a number instead of a name. He couldn't imagine it, wasn't sure if he wanted to. And God, he wanted to take all those memories away. He wished he could make her stop hurting, wished he could understand.

Hopper kicked himself, mentally, for being such a lousy caregiver. For being late, for neglecting her, for lying to her. And he hated this. Hated the way she looked at him, like he was just as bad as those lunatics in the lab, just as horrible.

He glanced at the curve of her wrist, against his chest, at the ink in her skin. And he cursed Brenner, for taking away her identity, her sense of self, her life. A flare of anger, rage, coursed through him, so hot and real and immediate that he couldn't catch his breath. He blinked, seeing red.

"I'm sorry." He said, resting his cheek against her curls. "I'm sorry, El."

Eventually, her sobs began to fade, then died out completely. And the air was still, and the darkness swallowed her. She sniffed, gazing at him through her tears.

"I'm sorry, too."

11. Flowers In Your Hair

Hopper led her out onto the porch by the hand. She sat on the step, and he sat next to her, clutching a mug of coffee in his hands. He watched the steam dance and shift as it faded in the cool morning air. El's eyes remained on the trees, blank and unfocused. She shivered.

Hopper got up, retrieved a blanket from inside, and draped it around her shoulders. She didn't respond to his touch, didn't give him any indication that she noticed his presence. The blanket seemed to swallow her. She looked so strikingly pale and fragile in the sunlight, against the canvas of green foliage. She seemed a ghost.

Her episode, last night, had certainly taken its toll. She remained silent and impassive, so tiny in the the overlarge sweatshirt she wore. She seemed to have taken two steps backward, seemed to be the same lost, scared little girl that escaped the lab, so many months ago.

"El . . ." Hopper said, and his voice died in his throat. She didn't look at him. Her fingers wandered, plucking at a loose thread on the fringe of the blanket.

"El, you can talk to me. Whatever you're thinking . . . whatever you're feeling . . ." He trailed off, kicking himself, not knowing what to say or how to say it. Because he'd never been one to talk about his feelings, and now he was stumbling in the dark, struggling to understand this girl, this enigma. She was a closed book, a foreign language, a tangled string; one strange mystery after another.

El looked at him, and her eyes were deep and dark, the windows of an old soul. Hopper shivered.

"You can talk to me." He said, again, because that seemed the only thing that mattered, that she knew she could trust him.

"I know." She said, as if that fixed everything. She took his hand and held fast. Silent stretched between them. Hopper stared into the wood, watching a squirrel scamper up the bark of a birch tree.

The days were growing longer and warmer on the threshold of

spring. God knew the sunlight and fresh air could do them both some good. He stood, and pulled El to her feet.

"Let's go for a walk."

They followed a winding stream through the wood. El clung to Hopper's hand, and they picked their way through the foliage. After a while, the frightened, tense expression slipped from her face, and a tentative smile took its place.

About a quarter mile upstream, Hopper sat on large, flat stone beside the water. El skipped to the water's edge and peered into it, watching the lithe bodies of fish flicker under the surface. She kneeled on the ground, and the grass brushed her jeans. Her fingers found the soil and she traced patterns over the soft, cool surface. She smiled, a little, unable to help herself. She liked this, being outside. She liked being surrounded by the chatter of living things and the scent of leaves and soil. She liked feeling the mud under her fingernails and the scruffy ends of pond fronds tickling the bare skin on her wrists. She liked feeling the sun on her shoulders, her back. It was so new, so different from cold, white hallways in the lab, so much better.

She threw a glance at Hopper. He nodded, encouragingly. El sat beside him, and they watched the sunlight dance on the surface of the stream as the water rushed and chuckled over the rocks. Birds twittered and chirped in the branches overhead, and El closed her eyes, letting the birdsong fill her ears.

Eventually, Hopper began walking again, still following the stream.

"Wildflowers." He said, pointing towards an embankment, where countless, colorful flowers burst from the foliage. El smiled, delighted, and brushed her fingers over the petals of poppies and dandelions.

"You ever made a flower crown?" Hopper asked, and chuckled, to himself. A faraway look came over his face, as it sometimes did, and El wondered where that look came from. She pushed the thought from her mind, finding it too big and unsettling. That was a question for another time, another place, another circumstance.

"No. What's that?" El asked, curious. Hopper began picking flowers, pinching the stems close to the roots. After he'd gathered an armful, he sat down in the grass. He showed El how to weave them into a vague circular shape, resembling a crown, a necklace, something.

El picked her own flowers, eager to recreate Hopper's flower crown. She stuck her tongue between her teeth, fumbling with the stems, trying to weave them together. Hopper helped her where she got stuck, offering words of encouragement. Her hands trembled, and she bit her tongue, frustrated.

"You'll get there, kid. It takes practice." He said, suppressing a laugh. The thing in her hands didn't really look like a crown at all, just a lopsided tangle of flowers and stems. She caught sight of his face, at the grin he was trying to hide, and almost hit him.

Twice, it fell apart in her hands, forcing her to start from scratch. In her mind, it wasn't Hopper sitting by her side but Papa, and he was a cold, dangerous presence, like a venomous snake, lying in wait amongst the flowers. He clicked his tongue in disapproval as the flower crown fell apart for the third time, and El flinched.

Do it again, Eleven. Do it right. This isn't working. Do you want to go to the Room?

"No." She said, aloud, chest tightening. She didn't want to disappoint him. She didn't want to go to the Room.

Eleven, I'll send you to the Room. You don't want that, do you?

"No." She said, and her voice broke. Her fingers tightened around the woven stems, and she felt her heart climb into her throat. Tears stung her eyes. She didn't want to go back there, to that cell. That dank, dark place. She didn't want to feel the walls pressing in on her, suffocating her, squeezing the air from her lungs.

"Kid, you okay?" Hopper asked. He looked at her, brow creased.

"Yes." She said, blinking furiously. She looked at him, deflating like a popped balloon.

"I can't do it." She cast the flowers aside, grimacing.

"Ah, c'mon . . . it just needs a couple finishing touches." He said, and took it in his hands. He adjusted the stems, making it a little more presentable. The flowers were a little battered and worse for wear, but otherwise, it wasn't half bad.

He placed it on her head, so it encircled her curls like a halo, and tucked a hand under her chin.

"Not half bad." He remarked, and grinned.

El couldn't fight the smile tugging at her lips. She forgot her frustration, forgot the phantom version of the man she once called Papa.

"Not half bad." She echoed.

12. Unspoken Things

He was making progress with them, he knew. He had to believe it, because anything else was unacceptable. He couldn't keep El locked up in that cabin forever. She was a ticking time bomb, waiting to go off. The ice was thin, and time was running out.

Keep the monsters and the mysteries and the alter-dimensional crap out of Hawkins, and I'll keep it all quiet. That was the deal.

It was working, for the time being.

While he was still suspicious of Sam Owens, he didn't have any other option. And he seemed decent enough, compared to Brenner. With a bit of convincing, a bit of luck . . . who knew? El could be attending school in the fall.

He had to bite his tongue, stopping himself from growing too hopeful. One wrong step, one wrong move, and those government bastards could be breaking down his door, taking El back to that . . . that place.

Over my dead body, he thought to himself, and laughed aloud.

Hopper was sitting in his office, feet propped up against the desk. Sunlight snuck its way through the cracks in the blinds. It was stuffy and hot in his office, and sweat clung to his neck.

It was late May, and spring was slowly giving way to summer. He'd heard, from Joyce, that school let out in less than two weeks. He'd also heard that Will's nightmares hadn't let up. He wasn't eating enough, wasn't sleeping enough. Talked less and less. Heavy dread settled in the pit of his stomach.

"Nothing's gonna go back to the way it was." He'd told her. It was true. For better or worse, no one came out of that week in November without a scar.

"And the Wheeler kid?" He'd asked, trying to sound casual.

"Mike?" Joyce said, surprised. "What about him?"

"I don't know. He seemed a little . . . off?" Hopper said, swallowing hard. Of course, this was a huge fucking understatement. The kid was a mess. The last time Hopper saw him was a couple months ago. Then, he was pale and fragile, dead on his feet. Hopper shivered, thinking of the numerous nights he'd spent, holding El, while she sobbed into his chest. She cried and cried, her ragged breaths punctuated by one word, his name. Mike. Like some kind of prayer.

He stopped outside her door, some nights, listening to her scream his name, melting into fresh years after the connection broke and she could no longer reach him through the static of the T.V. or the radio. He knew it was tearing her apart, every day he kept her away from him.

The warning bells went off in his head, and he pushed those dark, spiraling thoughts from his mind. It didn't do him any good, to go down that rabbit hole.

Too dangerous. Too much of a risk.

And we don't take risks. Why?

Because we're not stupid.

Joyce's brow furrowed. She stared at her shoes, working something out.

"He's okay, I think."

Hopper nodded, letting the conversation drop.

Hopper got off early. He left the station at four-thirty, and swung by the drive-through on the way home. He knocked, two-one-three, and waited for the locks to click. They did, and he stepped inside, shrugging off his jacket. El got up from her place on the couch and smiled, massaging her stomach.

"Hungry." She said, and corrected herself. "I'm hungry."

Hopper chuckled, nodding, and held up the paper bag.

"You're in luck, Kid. It's all junk food, tonight." He could almost hear

Flo's disapproving sigh.

They sat on the couch and ate while El watched her soaps. El ate her food slowly, picking up the french fries one by one and laboriously dipping them in the little puddle of ketchup.

Hopper could almost hear his mother squawking, scolding him for allowing food on the couch. He didn't mind at all. The damn thing was already old and battered, what was a couple more crumbs and a ketchup stain?

"Get me a drink, will you?" He asked, pointing to the fridge. He expected her to float the can across the room with her mind. Instead, she jumped up from the couch and went dutifully to the fridge, curls bouncing. He cocked an eyebrow, pleasantly surprised, and smiled in spite of himself. Her good moods were few and far between; this helpful, energetic El was a welcome change from the moody, lethargic teenager he'd grown accustomed to over the past couple months.

"Soda?" El called, from the kitchen.

"What did we talk about?" He said, prompting her to repeat her question.

"May I have a soda?" She paused a beat. "Please?"

"You may."

She came back to the couch, carrying two cans: a Schlitz and a 7-Up. She cracked the can and took a sip, grinning delightedly as the bubbles fizzed in her mouth, and Hopper was reminded that some things were still fairly new to her. The things that he hardly thought about at all as he went through his day were still strange and wonderful, in her eyes. And he thought maybe there was some magic in that, because watching her experience things for the first time made him stop and appreciate them, too. It was like being a kid again, finding the joy in plain, ordinary things.

They watched *Mr. Mom* until El began to fall asleep, and he told her to go to bed. She went without objecting, sock feet dragging on the

floor, overlarge flannel sleeves hanging at her sides. He followed her and pulled the blankets up to her chin, pausing to muss up her curls. He turned off the lamp. She stared, big, glassy eyes blinking at him, orbs in the dark. A thousand unspoken things passed between them, though neither one of them really realized the magnitude of the exchange. On his part, things like *get some sleep, you need it. I'll leave the door open, just a crack. You're safe. You're loved. I won't leave. I'll be here, if you need me.*

These things surfaced in his mind all jumbled together, in a fraction of a second. He couldn't hope to sort them all out, and they came as one, surging rush of emotion. He felt it press on his lungs, his beating heart.

He received some of the same, in return.

"G'night, Kid."

"Night."

13. The Storm

Thunder rumbled overhead, and rain lashed against the windows; The storm was an unrelenting beast, berating the walls of the cabin, demanding to be let in, attempting to tear the warmth and firelight apart, plank by plank.

El lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Static hummed behind her eyes. The clunky T.V. in the corner was silent, cold. Before the power went out, the news reporter on screen had warned against falling power lines, and flooding on the south side of Hawkins, where the ground gave way to a shallow valley. On T.V., El had watched, wide-eyed, as the rushing water swept a pickup truck down the street. Hopper told her, once, that Hawkins didn't have an ideal drainage system. In the rainy season, the water didn't have anywhere to go, so it flooded the streets. Volunteers stacked sandbags and helped others evacuate.

This storm was unexpected, in early June. But it came, raging through the sleepy Indiana town, ravaging the trees and power lines, forcing people from their homes.

El rolled onto her stomach and ripped the blindfold away from her face. She sniffed, burying her face in the blankets. The radio was just as useless as the T.V., in this weather. She couldn't reach Mike. The radio waves had jagged edges. They were broken and unreliable. And she was too nervous, too amped-up, to focus her energy on reaching him. Mike lingered just out of reach.

Outside, lighting cracked, illuminating her bedroom for a split second, and El felt gooseflesh crawl up her arm. The hairs on the nape of her neck stood up, tingling. She could feel the energy in the air. She was more receptive, somehow, to the shifting electricity, the energy. Thunder chased the lightning, following mere seconds after, shaking the walls of the cabin, jarring El's bones. She jumped, startled, and sat up.

She looked out the window. Branches whipped and swung in the harsh wind, rattling against the windowpanes. Her stomach twisted with unease, and her hands curled into the folds of the blankets.

Hopper was out there, in the storm, helping with the flood. A crease formed between her brow as she thought of him, out in this weather. He should be home, by now. He should be here, safe, in the comfort of the cabin.

El grabbed her radio and went to the kitchen, settling cross-legged on the sofa. Another flash of lightning illuminated the room, throwing long shadows across the walls. El looked around, swallowing. The shadows looked too much like monsters, lying in wait, shifting and waltzing across the walls and the ceiling, hiding in the far reaches of her mind. She pushed the thought away.

No more.

She fiddled with the dials, and instinct and worry urging her to try again, try and reach him. She called up Hopper's image in her mind. She replaced the blindfold over her eyes and leaned back, against the squashy cushions.

The static flickered and dipped. Outside, the roar of the wind grew distant, suffocated, as El focused her energy and attention on the radio in her lap. The world holds its breath, and El stepped into the Void.

She opened her eyes.

A figure stood on the far reaches of her consciousness. She could hear his voice, but it was distant and echoey, and El thought of the tin can telephones that some kids made, on one of her T.V. shows. As she drew nearer, she could make out his face, under his hood. Hopper. He was wearing a rain slicker and galoshes. His head was bent low, his face screwed up against the rain and wind. He was talking to someone she can't see. He bent down, picked up a sandbag, and carried it a couple yards, dropping it along a makeshift wall of similar bags. He straightened and wiped water from his brow.

She walked toward him, slipped her fingers through his own. He froze, grip tightening. El knew he couldn't see her, but maybe he could feel her. Maybe he could hear her.

"Come home." She said, and her voice broke. *"Please."*

He swallowed, jaw tightening.

"Soon, kiddo." He said, and ran a hand over the stubble on his jaw. "Soon."

She let go of his hand, and he dissolved. She opened her eyes, gasping a little, surprised to find her cheeks wet with tears. She wiped them away, hugging her knees to her chest. She sat and watched the shadows flicker. Outside, a monster shrieked in the night. The wind, composed of a thousand familiar voices, bit and tore at her heart. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, and she clamped her hands over her ears. A cast of familiar characters flash before her eyes, but they were ghastly, phantom versions of the real people she knows, marked and scarred, hidden behind visages of grief, pain . . .

Joyce, promising her "I'll be right here, if it ever gets too scary . . . I'll be right here" while her own son remains lost, inches from death.

Will, singing "Should I Stay or Should I Go" as the life bleeds out of him.

Hopper, a cigarette clamped in his teeth, bleeding running from the fingernail marks in his palms, saying one word, over and over again. *Sara*.

Mike, tears streaming down his face, begging her to come back, to say *something, anything*.

Papa, caressing her face, her shaved head. "*Extraordinary* . . ."

And her own reflection, dark, bleak eyes staring back at her, blood running from the nose and ears.

I'm the monster.

"No." El said, squeezing her eyes shut. "No. No . . . No!"

She found herself in the kitchen, pulling things off the shelves, smashing them, throwing glasses and beer cans on the floor. Glass shards flew in every direction. The curtains tumbled to the floor in a defeated heap. Across the room, the bookshelf tipped over, and her books spilled onto the floor with a dull *thud*. Vaguely, she was aware

of someone screaming. She realized that terrible, agonizing noise was coming from her own mouth. She didn't know how to make herself stop.

Lightning illuminated the room, slashing a silver beam of light across her face. Blood ran from her nose, staining her teeth, and the taste of it only fueled her panic, her fury.

Papa stood in the corner, hidden half in shadow. His eyes were fixed on her own, cold and gleaming, like steel. He grinned.

"*You're the monster.*" He said, softly. His voice was dangerous and low.

"No!" El screamed.

"*You're the monster. People are afraid of you. You don't deserve this. You don't belong here.*"

"No."

"*Everyone around you gets hurt. Everyone's in danger, and it's your fault.*"

"Get out of my head!" She screamed, and threw a plate at the ghost in the corner. It shattered on the wall. El blinked, and Papa was gone.

A choked sob burst from her mouth, and she sank to her knees, blood running from cuts on her palms. The stinging in her hands was nothing compared the ache in her chest, that *something*, bottled up, finally exploding out of her.

She collapsed in the pile of broken plates and bent cutlery, bringing her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth. The only sound in the cabin was the relentless beating of rain against her window, the roaring wind, the sound of her choked, panicked sobs.

That's how Hopper found her, weeping, bleeding from numerous cuts on her hands, surrounded by broken things.

He didn't say a word. He scooped her up and carried her to the bathroom. He sat her down on the counter and cleaned the blood from her hands and face, brushed her hair back from her forehead. After it was done, he carried her to bed and laid her down. He

peeled off his rain-soaked jacket and climbed in with her, and he held her, through the small hours of the morning.

14. Summer

Summer meant that the cabin, without an A/C, grew so unbearably hot and stuffy that El and Hopper spent much of their time outside, sitting on the porch. On these occasions, they sipped lemonade from paper cups and listened to the radio. He smoked and taught her to play Rummy or Speed.

He still insisted she stay inside while he was away, and found himself in the department store, buying electric fans to set up in various places around the cabin. They did little to dispel the insufferable heat that afflicted the small space. Often, he came home to a very disgruntled and sweaty thirteen year old. She talked less and less, and spent more and more time shut away in her room.

Other days, when he could afford to take some time off work and spend it with her, outside, she was in a fairly good mood. He dug his old fishing pole out of storage and tried to teach El how to fish, though he didn't have much luck, and she didn't have the patience. El rolled her eyes at him and fixed her gaze on the stream. With a flick of her curls, the silver body of a fish launched out of the water, flickered in the sunlight, and hit the rocky embankment.

"That's cheating." He said, chuckling, slightly taken aback.

On one such trek through the woods, El's foot snagged on a tree root, and she cried out, falling in the dirt. He rushed to her side. She groaned, teeth gritted, holding her ankle. Hopper made to touch it and she smacked his hand away. Tears glittered in her eyes. Her face twisted in an agonized grimace, and her cheeks flushed.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, I just wanna look." He said. "El, I can't help you unless I know what's wrong." He said, concerned.

After a bit more convincing, she let him get close enough to pull the hem of her jeans up. The ankle beneath had already begun to swell, growing red and angry.

"Shit." Hopper swore, gently probing the bones in her ankle. She winced, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"It's either broken or sprained. I can't tell. I'm not a doctor." He said. Sure, he had minimal first-aid training, but this? This was an entirely different ballpark. Panic rose in his throat, hot and immediate. It wasn't like he could up and take her to the emergency room. Hell, she didn't have any medical records, didn't have a goddamn *birth certificate*. On paper, she didn't exist.

"Sprained?" El asked, thickly.

"Twisted." Hopper said. El pursed her lips, screwing up her face against the pain.

"It hurts." She said.

"Do you think you can walk?" Hopper asked.

El shook her head. Hopper bent down and scooped her in his arms. He carried her the short distance back to the cabin and laid her on the couch. Gently, he eased the sneaker off her foot. He grabbed a bag of peas out of the freezer, instructing her to hold it over the ankle. He dug a couple Aspirins out of the medicine cabinet, and she took them with a glass of water.

After a while, the swelling seemed to go down, some. A large, purple bruise spread over her ankle.

"I don't think it's broken." Hopper said. "I think it's just twisted. It'll heal up in a couple days, a week."

"Promise?" El asked, wincing. Hopper laughed.

"I promise, Kid."

El's sprained ankle proved a pressing problem. He couldn't take her to the hospital, and he couldn't get crutches or anything to help her walk. She couldn't put any weight on it. She remained on the couch, propped up with pillows.

This of course, only heightened her frustration. Her temper bubbled close to the surface, all the time. The littlest things could to set her

off, in a screaming, crying fit. His patience was running thin, too. Twice, he'd stormed out the house, slamming the door on her rage, only to turn around and march right back to the house, apologies spilling from his mouth, overcome with guilt.

She'd glare at him, teary-eyed, refusing to speak to him. She was clearly hurt and frustrated and in pain. It wasn't her fault.

God, Jim. You're such a fucking idiot.

Hopper wanted to slap himself. This was just something they'd have to deal with. Another hiccup along the road to normalcy, if such a thing even existed, with a moody, telekinetic teenager who was anything *but*.

On Tuesday, he got off early and made a run to the ice cream parlor down the street from the station. He paused outside of the building. Sara's ghost stood on the steps. He blinked, furiously, a lump forming in his throat.

They made it a tradition, getting ice cream on Sunday afternoons. Hopper got a triple scoop of coffee almond fudge, his favorite, and Sara always wanted strawberry. Unshed tears stung his eyes as he stood on the walkway, staring at the OPEN sign's red lettering. He pawed around in his uniform pocket for a cigarette, and realized he left his pack at the station.

Fuck.

He steeled himself, and climbed the steps.

"How can I help you, sir?" A pretty, brunette lady behind the counter asked, smiling toothily.

"I'd like . . ." He trailed off, at the sound of a familiar voice. He turned around, catching sight of Henderson and Wheeler coming through the door. Henderson paused, catching sight of the Chief, and raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey, Chief."

"Henderson." Hopper said, nodding. "Enjoying your vacation?"

"Yes, sir. It's been great. Hot as balls, but great."

Wheeler elbowed his friend in the ribs, disgusted. "Dustin . . ."

"Oh, right. Sorry. It's uh, it's hot . . . outside." He finished, awkwardly.

"Hey, Wheeler." Hopper said, touching the kid's shoulder. "How're you holding up?" Mike flinched, not meeting his eyes. He didn't look good. Thin as a twig, all slumped shoulders and gaunt cheekbones and baggy, bloodshot eyes.

"I'm fine." He said, shortly, and pushed past him, marching up to the counter. Hopper watched him go, biting his tongue. The kids got their ice cream and left, waving hasty goodbyes.

"Sir? Can I help you?" The woman behind the counter asked, again.

"Wha—yeah, sorry. Uh, I'd like a triple-decker coffee almond fudge and one scoop of strawberry," he said, eyes roving over the sign. "In a waffle cone." He added, and grinned, in spite of himself.

He drove fast, juggling the two cones and the steering wheel, running two red lights in an effort to get to the cabin before the ice cream completely melted. Quite a feat. He rushed up the steps, pausing to give the secret knock. If El waited a little longer before unlocking the door, he didn't mention it.

"I brought you somethin', Ellie." He called. El's eyes widened, a bit, at the sight of ice cream. Hopper smiled. She'd never been one to refuse sweets.

"Let's go outside." He said, and helped her to her feet. She limped along, grasping his arm to support herself. He helped her onto the porch and sat her down, on the step, handing her the melting ice cream. She took it and began to eat it, slowly, savoring every bite.

"Still not talking to me?" He asked, looking at her. She glared at her toes, avoiding his gaze.

"I saw Mike, today." He said, casually. El's eyes widened.

"How is he?" She asked.

Hopper looked at her, guilt ripping through him.

"He's alright, Kiddo." Hopper said touching her shoulder. "He's alright."

She nodded, mouth twitching. A shadow of disappointment dwelled in her eyes.

"When can I see him?" El asked.

"Soon."

15. The Anniversary Effect

Their first big, real fight happened in early November, coming up on the anniversary of Will's disappearance. After he fucked up on Halloween. After she finally, *finally* crossed the line and broke not one, not two, but all three Don't Be Stupid Rules. He mulled it over, in his head, In hindsight, he can't blame her. It should've happened a lot sooner than it did.

"You are just like Papa!"

The words hit him square in the chest, and the pain was agonizing. He took a step back, trying to regain his balance, trying to recover from the blow. And he knew nothing would ever be the same. He realized, then, exactly how she felt. That she'd been locked in cells and rooms and darkness her entire life, and the cabin was no different. That she'd been lied to and controlled and treated like shit, and, really, was it so different from what he was doing?

He told her it was for her own good, but was it, really? Because he knew she was sick, bored out of her mind, and dying, a little bit, every day she stayed in the cabin. She'd traded one prison cell for another. It was time to stop kidding himself.

It should've happened a lot sooner.

He exploded. He blew up in her face, yelling, unable to control the sheer anger, *rage*, bursting out of him. And a lot of it had to do with the fact that he was so goddamn *scared*. Scared of losing her. He'd already lost one kid. He didn't think he could bear losing another.

It was time to stop pussy-footing around about that, too. It was time to stop playing games. Time to stop pretending.

She was his kid. His girl. She didn't have to be Sara for him to love her. And he did love her. With every fiber of his pathetic, broken self, he loved her. And goddamn anyone and anything that tried to take her from him, be it a lunatic scientist or an alter-dimensional monster.

He came home and she was gone, and he forgot how to breathe. It scared him to death.

And it made him so *angry*, that she would risk her life, her safety, everything they'd built, to go see some kid she had a crush on.

But that was a lie, too.

He knew it wasn't so simple. He knew what the Wheeler kid was to her, knew that whatever went on between them was something deeper, something *more* than a schoolyard crush. That Wheeler was the first one to take her in, that he'd given her the first home she'd ever known. That she trusted him, *loved* him, even. Loved him enough to lock herself in her room with the T.V. or the radio, and visit him. Every. Goddamn. Night. Loved him enough to scream his name in the dead of night, amidst tears and blind panic and nightmares.

It should've happened a lot sooner than it did.

He was on edge. God, everyone was. Will and Joyce. El, too. As he listened to Sam Owens talk about PTSD and the Anniversary Effect and whatnot, it made a whole lot of sense, to him. They were approaching a year since Will's disappearance, since El stood off against the alter-dimensional monster in a goddamn science classroom. The nightmares got worse, and she spent a lot more time alone, locked away in her room.

"That Post-Traumatic Stress thing, that stuff is real." He'd told Joyce. And it was. And all he could think of was El. The dark circles under her eyes, the nightmares that plagued her, the tension and irritability and everything good old Sam Owens mentioned . . . it all added up.

She was moody and snobbish and everything a teenager should be. But it was a hundred times worse, because they were still learning how to coexist, how to help each other; because she so desperately wanted control over her own life; because more often than not, words failed her and she got so *frustrated*, so *angry*. And it made him frustrated, and angry.

And one night, it all bubbled too close to the surface.

"You are just like Papa!"

It was out in the open, then.

And, in all his anger, all his blundering rage, he threatened to send her back to the lab.

He immediately regretted it, the moment the words left his mouth.

He hated himself for it. For being so clueless, so damn stupid

And he knew he could never take back the fact that he said those words. A thousand emotions conflicted, showing in her face, in her eyes. And he didn't think he'd ever be able to forget the way she looked at him, after he said it.

Too long. Too long, since he'd signalled.

Amidst the commotion and the chaos of Will's predicament, the darkness spreading through Hawkins, emerging from that lab, he'd forgotten. He hadn't apologized, after their fight. She probably thought he'd left her, abandoned her, run for the hills and never looked back.

Sitting in the lab's parking lot, clutching the steering wheel, he kicked himself. He fumbled and stuttered over his words, trying to make her understand how scared he was, how much he needed her to realize that he cared, that he'd never leave her, that he . . .

He loved her.

Her arrival at the Byers was the much-needed spark after a long and terrible night, after so much bloodshed and loss. He clutched the military-grade gun to his chest so tightly it hurt, listening to the screams of mutilated, dying men. And monsters were climbing out of a hole in the ground, literal hell. Seeing her walk through that door, it gave him that final push, the resolve to keep fighting, for her, for all of them. Because the universe had taken too much from him already.

She stood there, eyes blackened with thick makeup, hair slicked back. He watched her tearful reunion with Mike, and guilt burned, hot and

heavy, in his chest. He stepped forward, fighting to keep his voice steady.

"What the hell is this, kid? Where've you been?"

"Where've *you* been?" She snapped, and Hopper choked back a sob of relief. He pulled her close, clutching her shoulders to his chest, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. He felt her tense, for a moment, then relax. And for a moment he thought he wouldn't ever let her go.

He drove through the darkness, hands gripping the steering wheel, stealing glances at El, his kid, as she fumbled nervously with her hands, knitting her fingers together, in the passenger seat of the Blazer.

"I just wanna know where you've been." He asked.

"To see Mama."

He drew a shaky breath, blowing air through his nostrils. Guilt, like poison in his veins. He couldn't coax many details out of her, after that admission. And Hop knew that was a conversation for another time, another life, perhaps.

You fucked up this time, Hop.

This was on him. He left her. He lied to her.

She asked about Sara, and some part of him broke, hearing her speak the name aloud, but he gritted his teeth and told her the truth. No more lies. She deserved to know. And he deserved to speak Sara's name aloud, to let her go, like a bird from its cage, after all those years of keeping her locked away in some deep, dark place inside himself. He mentioned black holes, as if it made sense, as if El knew anything about black holes. It was the truth, though.

There he was, tripping over his words, yet again, trying make her understand.

I can't lose you.

Amidst all the terrifying things he'd witnessed, throughout his

lifetime

and the past year, after all the things that barely made a shred of sense, this was the only thing he knew for certain. He couldn't lose her. And for all his rambling, all his struggle to find the right words, she reached for his hand and held fast, silencing him. Because she didn't need words. She *got* it. She understood loss better than anyone.

You ever feel cursed?

He couldn't be. Because the universe had given him this mysterious intricacy, this girl called Eleven. The universe had given him a second chance.

The elevator swung, to and fro, in sickening, swooping motions. Hopper clutched the gun, staring at the Gate, the rift where the Earth had split in two and unleashed its demons, where the shadow monster lurked, a monstrous silhouette. He watched his girl stare death in the face. Selflessly, fearlessly, while he stood by, running through a string of curses in his head, damning the monster and its minions and everything that had tried so hard to tear them apart.

He got a good look at her face, the veins popping out along her neck and temple, the streams of blood running from both nostrils, tracing the lines on either side of her mouth. He knew something had shifted, inside her. She was strength and darkness and rage, and he could see the emotion, the anger, swirling inside her, a storm. He watched, in awe and terror, as she began to rise of the ground, toes dangling just inches from the platform.

When it was done, she collapsed, falling like a ragdoll on the floor of the elevator. And he gathered her in his arms, pressing her to his chest so tightly, trying to hold all her pieces together, and for one, terrifying moment, he thought he'd lost her. And then she took a breath, gasping, holding onto him. He shut his eyes against the tears threatening to spill over his lashes, shaking with relief.

"You did good, Kid." He gasped, and her body sagged against him. "You did so good." He pressed his lips against her temple.

The elevator swayed and the bodies of the monsters fell around them.

And they held each other.

He carried her back to the car, through the darkened, bloodied hallways, whispering promises of safety and comfort. She hooked her arms around his neck, letting her head loll against his chest. She drifted in and out of consciousness, exhausted, and blood still trickled steadily from her nose and ears.

He laid her down in the backseat, and she caught his hand in her own. He froze, brushing a loose strand of hair away from her face.

"Home?"

"Yeah, kid. We're going home." He assured her. She nodded, and closed her

eyes.

El slipped in and out of consciousness, vaguely aware of the rumbling car engine, the leaden heaviness of her limbs. After an indiscernible period of time, she felt the car cease to move, heard the engine fizzle and die. Hopper opened the door, and cold air brushed across her face, and he scooped her in his arms.

She became more acutely aware of her surroundings, of Hop's jacket against her cheek and the gentle chirping of crickets in the brush, a welcome sound after such heavy silence. She opened her eyes. They were approaching the Byers' front steps, and El let out a strangled sort of moan.

The memories of the past hour came rushing back, a shock, a slap across the face. She remembered descending into the rift, remembered the dull, distant sound of gunfire as Hop shot down the Mind Flayer's soldiers, and the white, hot flare of energy coursing through her veins as she faced the dark entity through the crack in the Earth. She remembered walking through the Byers' front door, catching sight of Mike for real, the first time, in such a long, long time . . .

Mike.

"Mike." She mumbled, as Hopper carried her down the hall and laid

her down on Will's bed, propping her head against a pillow. And, as if the word itself could conjure him, he was there, taking her hand, his wide, coffee-colored irises swimming into her line of vision. He kneeled at her bedside.

"El?" He said, voice breaking, clutching her hand against his cheek. She smiled, and her lips trembled as she fought the tears threatening to spill over her lashes.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe." He said, worriedly.

"Mike." She said, again. He was crying, too, she realized, and her grip tightened around his hand.

"You're safe. You're back." He said, as if to reassure himself, that she was alive and real and *there*. Because he'd spent so much of the past year chasing after ghosts, sure that he was going crazy, that he'd fallen off the edge . . .

El nodded.

"I promised."

Mike laughed, swallowing hard, shaking his head. He took a seat on the edge of the bed, still holding her hand. He traced his fingers over her hands, and she closed her eyes, comforted by his nearness, by the gentle, circular motions of his fingertips over knuckles.

"El?" Mike asked, softly.

"Mike?"

"I . . . I'm glad you're home."

"Me too." She said, unable to wrench her eyes away from him, taking him in. She gave his hand a squeeze, one he returned. For a moment, Kali's words resurfaced in her mind.

"I feel . . . whole. Like a part of me was missing and now it's not."

She did know. Holding his hand, drinking his presence, it was enough to tempt fresh tears. Carefully, wordlessly, Mike wiped them away.

He brought her hand up and pressed them against his lips.

He was the missing part, the piece of her that had remained empty and black, a jagged, unhealed wound, the past year. And now he was here, with her, and the missing piece fell into place.

Comforted by the thought, she drifted off.

El woke, groaning, a little bewildered. Because everything hurt. Every part of her was heavy and aching, and her head throbbed with every beat of her heart. She opened her eyes, trying to discern her surroundings in the dim light. She was lying in Will's room; she could see the various drawings pinned to the walls, some Star Wars action figures, a *Jaws* poster.

She sat up, or rather, *tried* to sit up, before discovering someone's hand clutched in her own. She froze.

Mike.

He lay beside her, dark hair splayed over the pillow in a mess of dark curls, face slack and relaxed, in sleep. His fingers were interlaced with hers. The other hand was tucked under his cheek.

She leaned back against the pillows, taking a breath. She squeezed her eyes shut and choked back a sob of relief. He was real. He was here. He was safe.

She turned her body towards him, tentatively, and brushed a stray curl away from his face. He shifted, and mumbled something she didn't quite catch. She kept brushing her fingers through his hair. Slowly, her hand moved to his brow, tracing the bridge of his nose, caressing his eyelids, his cheeks, his lips, taking a moment to appreciate him, to reassure herself that he was really there.

His eyes fluttered open, and she took her hand away, blood rushing to her cheeks.

"El?" He mumbled, and stifled a yawn. His eyes fell on their clasped hands and he blushed, tried to take his hand away. She squeezed his hand, needing to touch him.

"Don't." She said, quickly. "Stay."

"Okay." He said, quietly, and something in his eyes told her that he understood. He understood that she *needed* him, here. She felt her heart swell, then, with something that could've been love. He understood her in a way the others, Dustin and Lucas, didn't. He understood her, without demanding any explanation, any words. He just *knew*.

Mike scooted closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and her head found the place on his chest where his heart beat, steady and strong, against her cheek. And a hard lump formed in her throat, listening to it.

"Stay?" She asked, again, looking up at him. His mouth twitched, and he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"For as long as you want."

Hopper stood outside the door, hand resting on the knob, listening to the exchange. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, exhaling, knowing he was definitely *not* ready for this. But there it was, right in front of him, young love in all its awkward, hormonal glory.

He knew Wheeler was a good kid. Mike had a level head on his shoulders. And he cared about El. They cared for each other in a way that was almost . . . too mature, too adult, for people so young. But they'd been through a lot, and, well, he figured you didn't come out of a situation like this without gaining a few more years. They'd grown up too fast.

They'd seen some pretty horrible things. And considering El's past, all the awful stuff she'd been through . . . she deserved this. They deserved this. They deserved each other.

So he let them alone, despite the tiresome nag in the back of his head, that it wasn't appropriate or responsible to allow two teenagers to sleep in the same bed together, that they were too young to feel anything like love.

This was the exception.

He retreated, back to the kitchen. He glanced into the living room, where the other kids, Steve included, were sprawled across the floor. They'd made a makeshift nest of sorts, out of spare blankets and pillows, and they'd fallen asleep lying every which way.

Henderson was snoring loudly, lying flat on his back. The redhead was lying on her side, and her arm was stretched out, so that her hand lay mere inches away from Sinclair's. They could've fallen asleep holding hands. Steve was stretched on the couch, and his breath whistled clumsily from what Hopper suspected to be a broken nose.

Hopper made a mental note to tend to the kid's injuries. He hadn't received a straight answer to where exactly the injuries came from, though he knew the guy he'd discovered lying on the kitchen floor the night before, surrounded by shards of ceramic and an empty syringe, had something to do with it. It had been a long night.

Joyce, Will, and Jonathan had taken residence in Joyce's bedroom, and Nancy was curled up in an armchair in the front room, rifle propped beside her.

All heads accounted for, he began making coffee. Yet, even the caffeine couldn't curb his itch for a smoke. He reached in his shirt pocket for his pack, when he heard footsteps on the kitchen tiles and turned to see Joyce in the doorway, holding up a cigarette. She offered him a small, wan smile. He returned it, chuckling, and held up his lighter.

They sat at the kitchen table, passing the cigarette back and forth between them, and Hopper watched smoke curl gracefully from the end of it, held in Joyce's fingers. Her eyes were swollen and red, and a few more lines seemed to have appeared in her face. She seemed a thousand years old. She stared into her lap, not talking, and the silence that stretched between them wasn't uncomfortable. He was content to just sit there, with her, watching the hands on the clock drag them into a new day.

"How long?" She said, after a while.

"What?"

"How long have you been hiding her?"

"Since Christmas. Almost a year."

Joyce cocked an eyebrow.

"I couldn't risk telling anybody, even you. I wanted to tell you. Hell, I thought I'd go crazy if I didn't, but it was too dangerous." Hopper sighed. She passed him the cigarette, and he took a long drag. "I've just . . . I've been so afraid, that those people, Brenner's people, would show up on my doorstep and take her away."

Joyce nodded, solemn.

"Those people, the things they did to her . . ." She said, and trailed off, mouth twisting into a grimace. Her lips trembled, and she pressed a hand over her mouth.

"She deserves this." Joyce said, thickly. "She deserves a normal life."

"She's smart. Real smart. And curious." He told Joyce, dragging deep on the cigarette. "And I look at her and it's like . . ." Hopper paused, fighting to keep his voice steady. "It's like I've got a daughter back, like Sara's still here." A hard lump had formed in his throat. He drew a shaky breath.

"She's not Sarah." Hopper said, sniffing. He brushed at his eyes, and forced himself to meet Joyce's worried, tired eyes. "She's not Sarah, but . . ." He paused, searching for words. There's so many things he ought to say, but he's never been one for grand soliloquies. "Sometimes I feel like the universe is giving me a second chance, you know?"

Joyce's mouth twitched. She took his hand, squeezed it.

"I know."

16. New Rules

A sound like a gunshot cracked through the air, shattering the sleepy, early-morning sounds surrounding the cabin. A flock of birds took to the sky, squawking in protest. A rabbit fled, returning to its burrow. Hopper froze, heart sinking through the floor. He stood up, abandoning his coffee, and reached for his gun. For one, terrible moment he was convinced they'd blown their cover, and Brenner's men were had shown up on his doorstep, come to take his girl away. He stood up, holding the gun with trembling fingers, and went to the window, peering through a crack in the blinds.

"Christ." He said, aloud, setting his revolver on the kitchen table. He opened the door, and went outside.

Mike Wheeler struggled to his feet, brushing dirt from the seat of his pants. He froze, looking at the chief, and a blush crept up his neck.

"Hey, Chief. I, uh, didn't know . . . the trip wire . . ." He stammered.

Hopper's mouth twitched.

"How'd you get here?"

"I rode my bike." Mike grinned, sheepishly, gesturing to the bike he'd ditched against a tree a couple yards behind him.

It had been a few days since El closed the Gate. He'd insisted she return to the cabin, to err on the side of caution. She protested vehemently, reduced to tears. And that broke his fucking heart, but what choice did he have? He wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Ellie, it'll be different this time. I promise." He'd told her. And he intended to keep that promise. No more lies.

Eventually, she agreed, on the condition that her friends could visit as long as they came announced, in groups of no more than two or three. Apparently, Mike overlooked the former condition.

"Well, you scared me half to death, kid. Come inside, it's freezing."

He turned, and Mike followed him, eagerly.

“Woah.” Mike said, staring wide-eyed, around the cabin. Hopper had tidied up, a bit, since their fight, since Nancy Wheeler exorcised the Shadow Monster out of Will with a fire poker.

“It’s nice.” Mike said, grinning.

The sound of door creaking on its hinges and the pad of footsteps down the hall alerted them of El’s presence. She stood in the doorway, dressed in pajamas and afflicted with a horrendous case of bedhead, rubbing sleep from her eyes. Her face broke into a wide smile, and she skipped across the room, throwing her arms around Mike’s middle.

“Why don’t you show Mike around?” Hopper suggested.

She did, taking his hand, pulling him down the hall. Hopper busied himself in the kitchen, popping Eggos in the toaster, pouring himself another cup of coffee. He returned to his seat, at the table, poring over the newspaper. The article on the front page covered the incident at Hawkins Lab, and claimed a chemical leak led to Barbara Holland’s death. He’d read over it three times, already. Hawkins Lab had shut down, and the nightmare they’d all lived through had been covered up and swept under the rug. Again. It was for the best, he thought. Best to move on, to try to get through each day, to heal the wounds and put all the horrible memories far out of mind.

The toaster popped, derailing Hopper’s train of thought.

“El, breakfast!” He called. She trotted into the kitchen a moment later, followed by Mike. El piled Eggos onto her plate, dousing them with syrup and whipped cream. She passed the bottle to Mike, as he chattered on and on about the things she’d be able to see and do once she came out of hiding. El clung to his every word, looking at him like he’d put the fucking sun in the sky. Hopper shook his head.

“We can even go to the arcade, if you want!”

“Arcade?”

“Yeah, it’s this place where kids go to play video games. It’s really

cool, you'll love it . . .”

Hopper smiled, amused. El reached for the bottle of syrup, preparing to pour a fresh layer on her triple-decker Eggo sandwich.

“You kids keep eating like that, you'll get fat. Like me.” He said, massaging his stomach. El rolled her eyes.

“But it's good.” She said, matter-of-factly.

Hopper chuckled.

After the plates had been cleared away, Hopper left for work. He grabbed his jacket from the coat hanger, fishing in his pocket for a pack of smokes. He glanced at the pair. Mike sat on the sofa, El beside him, leaning on his shoulder. Hopper sighed, wondering if he'd made a terrible mistake.

“I'm leaving. Don't go outside, El. Don't open the blinds. You know the rules.”

“But . . .”

Hopper shot her a look, and she fell silent. He softened.

“I'll be home by six. Be good.” He gave Wheeler a pointed look. “Both of you.”

So, it began. The next chapter. Wheeler payed visits to the cabin every chance he got, sometimes accompanied by another of El's friends. Henderson, or Sinclair.

Mike brought a bunch of puzzles and books, for El, along with his Atari game system. Another time, he brought a heavy stack of textbooks and worksheets.

“Mr. Clarke lent them to me.” He explained. “El needs to catch up, so she can go to school with us, next year.”

El looked at Hopper, then, brown eyes melting his soul. Like she wanted nothing more in the entire world than to go to school with Wheeler and those kids.

“Maybe, kid.” Hopper said, running a hand over his stubble. “Maybe.”

Mike took up his self-appointed duty of filling in El’s missing years of proper education, teaching her about stuff like photosynthesis and velocity and Pythagorean theorem. He chattered for hours and hours. Listening to him gave Hopper a headache, but El sat there, wide-eyed and silent, absorbing every word.

Hopper contributed, as well. El was a fast learner, faster than most, and that, paired with her eagerness to discover, to do something *right*, for once, made her an exceptional student. But she had twelve years of lost time to make up.

El agonized over the worksheets, growing frustrated, gnawing on the end of her pencil.

Hopper taught her multiplication tables and some basic history lessons, trying his best to explain the Civil Rights Movement and the World Wars and shit like that.

El read through the worksheets and the books while he was gone, storing up questions in her head and in a little notebook, until she could ask him or Mike or one of the others, later. He answered her questions as best he could.

Nancy visited, some days, with a box of old clothes or a magazine. Jonathan lent her his camera, and El spent the rest of the day snapping pictures of everything and nothing at all. Jonathan took the roll of film, promising to develop them the first chance he got. A couple days later, he knocked on the door, presenting a pile of photographs. El’s face split into a broad grin, delighted, as she sorted through the pictures. She showed them to Hopper, pride glowing in her face. He thumbed through them, inspecting snapshots of a sunset, a knot of wildflowers, a bird. He smiled.

“They’re great, kid.” He said.

Will visited, too, after he recovered from that nightmarish week. He paused in the doorway, staring at El. Their lives had been tangled together for the better part of a year, and they still hadn’t formally

met. Will couldn't participate in Lucas and Dustin's conversations, about her. Whispered, so Mike wouldn't overhear. She was a memory, a ghost. A legend, until now. Now, she was right in front of him. He smiled, shyly, eyes finding the floor.

"H-Hey," he stammered, "I'm . . . I'm Will."

"I know." El said, quietly. He stuck out his hand, awkwardly, and El ignored it, embracing him. He stiffened, surprised, and hugged her back. When she stepped back, her eyes shone with tears.

They were fast friends, drawn together by fate, by an understanding that went deeper than words. Will was quiet, and El liked that just fine. He found he could talk to her, about the Demogorgon. About the Upside Down. Anything. And she listened. She listened, and she got it. And when he didn't feel like talking, when he had a bad day, El was content to sit with him, an inexplicable *something* passing between them. She understood him, the way no one else really did. He couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that he knew her, somehow. From a past life. A fever dream.

He brought his crayons and a pile of blank paper with him, during his visits, and they'd lay stretched out on the floor, sketching and drawing away the monsters in their heads. When Will froze, overcome with a panic attack, El was there, hand clutching his, grounding him in the present. When El relived her days in the lab, when the monsters in her head came out to play, Will was there, to chase away the shadows. When the darkness pressed in, a little too close for comfort, they were there to hold each other. They shared similar scars. They made it through the bad parts, together.

When Max arrived at the cabin, with Lucas, the girls tiptoed around each other. The silences between them were pregnant and tense, and Max didn't know how to act around her. This girl, they called Eleven. This girl, the rest of the party practically worshipped. She was their mage. Their hero. For Max, she was uncharted territory. And, frankly, a bit of a bitch.

When El approached her, cautiously, shyly, it caught Max completely by surprise.

"I'm sorry." El said. She shrugged her shoulders, offering an explanation "I acted like a mouth breather. I'm sorry."

Max cocked an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you did."

El glanced at the floor. Max sighed.

"It's okay, though." Max said, hurriedly. "It's water under the bridge."

El looked at her, puzzled.

"What's 'water under the bridge'?"

"Uh, it means, uh . . . it doesn't matter, anymore." Max paused, chewing her lip. "I forgive you."

El beamed. She stuck out a hand.

"Friends?"

Max hesitated, took it.

"Yeah, sure." She said. "Friends."

Hopper climbed the porch steps, like usual, pausing outside the door. He knocked. Their usual, secret knock. Two. One. Three.

The locks clicked, and Hopper went inside.

He'd looked forward to opening a beer, having a smoke, maybe sharing a quiet evening with El. He hadn't expected to find six, screaming teenagers sprawled around his living room, caught in the throes of that strange, fantasy game El chattered on about. Dungeons and Dragons, or something. He froze, taking in the soda cans, scattered about. A bag of Cheetos, bits of stray popcorn . . . The couch had been pushed out of the way, blankets and pillows strewn about.

"Hey!" He yelled. "Hey, hey, hey, what's goin' on, here?"

Six sets of eyes fixed on him, guiltily. El sprang to her feet.

“Hop . . .”

“I said *groups of two or three*, El.” He said.

“I . . .” El began. Her eyes found the floor. “I’m sorry.”

Hopper sighed, drawing a deep breath.

“Call it a night, guys. Time’s up.”

Six different voices protested, loudly.

“We’ve been playing for nine hours!” Mike exclaimed, groaning.

“Christ.” He said, to himself. “Alright, alright. Fine.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. God, he needed a cigarette . . .

“You can play for one more hour. One. Hour. Got it?” El nodded, mouth twitching into a smile. She stepped forward, threw her arms around him.

“Thank you.”

He ruffled her mess of curls.

“Sure, kid.” He said, chuckling. He owed it to her. After everything. And really, was it so bad?

She deserved this.

She deserved the world.

17. Family

Hopper drove, with nowhere in particular to go, hands clenching the steering wheel. Tight. His fingers, bloodless and pale, resembled large, ghostly spiders. Some peppy, upbeat song about love and nonsense floated out of the radio, imbued with static. Hopper switched it off, irritated, content to drive in silence. He drove, turning down corners and back roads, watching the streetlights flick by. The inky sky stretched out, above him, moonless and glittering with stars—a thousand tiny diamonds.

His headlights cut through the fog and mist, illuminating the ghosts. While Hopper drove, he rehearsed what he'd say, when he returned to the cabin. When he worked up the courage to show her the birth certificate, to explain to her what it meant. In all honesty, he wasn't even sure what it meant, himself.

The low rumble of the Blazer's engine, usually a soothing, familiar sound, couldn't ease the ache in his chest, the nerves fluttering low in his gut. He didn't know why the prospect of showing her that certificate—tucked safely in his glove compartment, for now—scared him so much. It was just a piece of paper, after all. But it meant so much more. It was proof of this *thing* they'd built, over the past year. It assigned a definition, even a face, to what he felt for her. What he hoped she felt, for him. She was his daughter. She wasn't Sara, but she was still his kid. The slip of paper in his glove compartment made it real.

He wasn't sure how she'd handle it. Would she understand? Was she happy, under his care? Did she think of him as a father, as he thought of her as a daughter? And if not a father, at least a friend. An ally. He thought so. God, he hoped so.

He mulled over the things he wanted to say. He'd never been good with words. He wasn't one for sentimentality, either. But he wanted to do this right.

He turned down Mirkwood, as was his habit. He shut off his headlights, parking about a quarter mile down the road. As he walked, leaves crunched under his feet. He watched his breath

become white puffs of steam, swirling in the late November chill. He came to the chain link fence, hooked his fingers through the wire, peering into the shadows, checking to make sure all the windows remained dark, and the chain around the fence undisturbed. All was quiet.

Hopper blew out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a pack of smokes. He lit one, jamming it between his teeth. He took one drag, two, and dropped the cigarette on the ground, crushing it under the toe of his boot.

Time to go.

He returned to the Blazer, pausing to signal *home soon* over the radio. He pulled onto Mirkwood, heading home.

He knocked, just as he always did. The locks clicked, as they always did. His fingers fiddled with edges of the certificate, in his pocket.

"El?" He asked. No answer. A couple of candy wrappers, a can of soda, and a half-eaten sandwich littered the table. A rumpled pile of blankets lay, abandoned, on the sofa. He sighed, pausing outside her door. He knocked, softly, and pushed open the door. She lay on her bed, sprawled on her back, reading a book. She looked up, when he entered.

"Hey, Ellie." He said.

"Hey." She said.

"Did Mike visit, today?"

"No. He called. We talked."

He nodded.

"You hungry?"

He popped a few T.V. dinners in the microwave. El retrieved silverware from the drawer and set it on the table. He settled in to his meal, and they ate in comfortable silence. After the table had been

cleared, the dishes rinsed, he decided he couldn't prolong the inevitable any longer.

"I've got something to show you." He told her. She blinked, curious. He sat her down on the couch, and she looked at him, expectant. He took a breath, steeling himself, and pulled the slip of paper from his pocket. He unfolded it, slowly, painstakingly, and handed it to her. Her fingers tightened around the edges, as she read it.

"This is . . . me?" She asked, looking at him. He nodded.

"It's a birth certificate." He explained. "It lets the government know who you are and when you were born and stuff like that. It means those lab goons can't take you away. You're a person, not a lab experiment." He tapped the certificate. "This paper is proof."

"Jane . . . Hopper?" She asked. Hopper's mouth twitched.

"Yeah. It means I'm your legal guardian, now." Hopper cleared his throat. "I'm like a parent. Like a mom or a dad. I'll take care of you, for as long as you need me."

El looked at him, puzzled.

"This means . . . family?" She said, tasting the word. Hopper nodded.

"Yeah, family. We're family, now." She quieted, eyes glued to the paper. "If that's what you want." Hopper added, hurriedly.

"Yes." El said, firmly. "It's what I want." Hopper's heart crawled into his throat.

"It's what I want, too." Hopper said. And he meant it. With every particle of his pathetic, broken self he meant it.

"Family." El said, again. A smile stretched across her face. She leapt to her feet, throwing her arms around him. He hugged her back, tightly, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"Thanks, Dad. For everything." She said. He inhaled, sharply, taken aback. She'd never called him that, before.

"Sure, kiddo." He said, voice breaking. His brain was still trying to process the whole 'Dad' thing. He hadn't held the title in years.

She smiled, eyes shining. She stood, dashed to her room, and returned with a book tucked under one arm. She pushed it into his hands, settling herself on the couch, beside him.

"Read?" She asked. Hopper chuckled, opening Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story* to El's bookmarked page. As he read, she nodded off, against his shoulder. He paused, glancing at her, feeling, for once in his life, *whole*.

18. The Snow Ball

El stood in the bathroom, peering at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She'd attacked it with a hairbrush and spray and gel and everything else under the sun in an attempt to tame her mess of wild curls. To no avail. She lifted a hand, fussing with a strand of hair that refused to lay flat against her head. She plucked at it, wet her fingers and attempted to smooth it down. She sighed, heavily, returning her attention to the palette of eyeshadow, beside the sink. She hesitated, overwhelmed.

The palette contained a number of shades of blue and tan, pink and purple. After careful consideration, she selected a pretty, indigo shade from the palette, and began to apply it. She moved on, to mascara and lip-gloss, like Nancy taught her. When she's finished, her eyes flick to the mirror, again. She froze, staring at herself, horrified. She looked silly. Like a clown. The lip gloss had smudged, a little, in the corner of her mouth. She didn't look anything like she'd hoped. Mike's good at this sort of thing. A ghost of a smile tugged at her lips, as she recalls the memory. The boys, digging around in the Wheelers' boxes of old Halloween costumes. Mike, stealing Nancy's makeup, sitting her down on the bed.

"Don't worry, El. This . . . this is called blush. It's, uh, it makes your cheeks all rosy, I think. I don't know . . . but I'm gonna put it on, okay? Just . . . hold still." She remembers the way he stuck his tongue between his teeth, in concentration. The way he chattered on and on, explaining it all, trying to reassure her. To make her feel safe.

"You look pretty. Really pretty."

Kali did something, similar. Black instead of soft pinks and reds, though. And El was *bitchin'* instead of pretty. Eleanor, Jane. Another mask, another façade.

"I'm Mike, short for Michael."

"Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven."

She was El. It was the truest name she owned.

Now, looking at her face, in the mirror, heat rose in her cheeks. She growled, in frustration, slamming her palm on the counter. She knocked the palette, and it clattered to the ground.

A sharp rap on the door.

"El, you alright?" Hopper asked.

"I'm fine." She said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"Are you gonna come out?"

"No."

"C'mon, Ellie. Lemme see."

"No."

"El . . ."

She sighed, giving in, and opened the door. She stomped out of the bathroom, humiliation written across her face. Hopper fought to keep a straight face.

"Don't." El hissed, silencing the snarky comment dancing on his tongue. She could read him better than anyone. Hopper's face fell, and El knew he felt bad.

"El . . ."

She looked ridiculous. She could see it, in his face.

She pressed her lips together, tightly, in a last ditch-effort to suppress the tears. She shook her head. Her chest felt tight.

What if Mike doesn't think she's pretty? She can't do the stupid makeup. She can't go to the stupid Snow Ball . . . She can't do

anything right.

What the hell is wrong with you?

She felt like she might explode. Hopper's brows knit, concern etching across his face.

"El, you okay?"

She nodded, opening her mouth. And burst into tears. Hot, ugly, uncontrollable tears. Hopper's arms encircled her, instinctively.

"El, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. She couldn't speak, couldn't breathe.

After a while, she pulled herself together. Enough to step back, draw a deep breath. She mopped her eyes, smudging the makeup.

"I'm . . . sorry." She breathed, hiccupping. "I just . . . I c-can't . . ." She trailed off, dissolving into fresh tears. Hopper hugged her, rubbing her back.

"Hey, hey, shhhhh." Hopper said. "It's okay, El." She wound her fists into the fabric of his jacket, hysterical.

"Hey, tell ya what. Go wash up, okay? And I'll do your makeup."

She looked at him, incredulous. She wiped her nose with her sleeve, sniffing.

"What, don't believe me?" Hopper said, scoffing. "I never told you I attended a prestigious cosmetology school, way back when?"

"C-Cosmetology?" El said, tripping over the word. Hopper laughed, waving his hand.

"I had a daughter. I did makeovers. I'm pretty good, all things considered."

They fell into a tense, pregnant silence. Hopper hardly ever mentioned Sara in front of El. For a moment, it felt as if a ghost filled

the empty space, between them. The temperature dropped a few degrees, inside the cabin. El shivered. Hopper cleared his throat, roughly, averting his eyes.

"Go wash up."

She did, returning to the sink. She turned the faucet, splashing cold water onto her face. She couldn't do anything for the blotchy redness around her eyes and nose, from crying. At least the water rid her face of that horrendous, indigo eyeshadow.

Hopper sat her down on the kitchen counter, opening the palette. He muttered to himself, as he worked, painting her face with a soft, pink blush. He painted her eyes a softer, muted pink, re-creating her attempted smoky-eye look. The lip gloss tasted like strawberries. She held as still as possible, watching him, while he worked. When he finished, he stood back, admiring his handiwork.

"Not half bad."

She scooted off the counter, skipping to the mirror. She stole a glance, at herself. The girl staring at her wasn't Eleanor, or Jane, or Experiment 011. She was El.

Pretty.

Yeah, really pretty.

She looked at Hopper, grinning.

"Not half bad."

She went into her room, taking the dress from the hook on the back of her door. She ran her hands over the soft fabric. She'd gone dress shopping with Nancy, earlier that day. No more borrowed dresses. This one was her very own.

She pulled it on, liking the way it felt, on her skin. Soft, light as air. She stepped into her black, slip-on shoes, and opened the door.

Hopper pretended to scrutinize her, scratching his beard. El slapped his arm, playfully.

"What?" She demanded.

"There's just . . . one last touch . . ." He said. He carefully, ceremoniously, pulled off the braided, blue bracelet he wore—the one that belonged to Sara.

"Give me your hand." He said, holding out his own. She did. He slipped the bracelet onto her wrist.

"There." He said, voice thick. "Perfect."

She looked at him, eyes wide. "But . . ."

"No buts. I want you to have it." He said. His eyes glittered with tears.

El gazed at the bracelet, on her wrist. She ran her fingertips over the band, a ghost's touch. She bit her lip.

"Thank you." She said, or tried to say, but she couldn't speak. Hopper hugged her, tightly, smoothing her hair.

"Do you want to talk about her?" Hopper asked. "About Sara?"

El nodded.

Hopper sat on the couch. She sat beside him. And he told her about Sara.

"She was my girl. My daughter. She would be your age. But she got sick. She got cancer, when she was young. She died." Hopper said.

"I miss her. And it's hard for me to talk about her. But it's not fair. I should've told you sooner, Ellie. I just . . . I didn't know how." A tear ran the length of Hopper's face, and fell into his lap. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." El said.

"She was a lot like you. She loved to read. She asked too many questions. She was smart. So, so smart." Hopper heaved a sob. El sensed the turmoil, under the surface—darkness and grief. The black hole, swirling inside him. Talking about her was a terrible kind of catharsis, for him. For both of them.

"I miss her. A lot. But it's time to move on."

El took his hand, squeezing it, tightly.

He looked at her, smiling. He checked his watch, yelped.

"You're gonna be late. Let's go. Get in the car."

He stood, grabbed his jacket and keys, and headed for the door. They stepped into the chilly, early December air. She clambered into the front seat, and he fired up the Blazer. El gazed out the window, watching the streetlights flick by, outside the window. Orange smudges, through the layer of condensation, on the glass.

Hopper pulled into the school parking lot, just outside the gym. El peered at the building, with its string lights and silver balloons. She heard music, faint and muffled. She looked at Hopper, feeling sick. He grabbed her hand, thumb caressing Sara's bracelet.

"You'll be fine, kiddo. It'll be fine."

She nodded, climbing out of the Blazer. She took a step, two, and wheeled around. She opened Hop's door, threw her arms around him.

"Thank you." She breathed.

Hopper chuckled.

"You're welcome, kiddo." He said. "Go on, now. Mike's in there, waiting for you."

El nodded. She turned, steeling herself, making her way to the gym's big, double doors. She threw a glance, over her shoulder. Hopper waved. She lifted a hand, waved back. El squared her shoulders, confidence stealing over her. She grabbed the door handle, wrenched it open, and stepped inside.

19. Christmas Pt. 1

Christmas was just around the corner. Hopper spent his days dodging El's constant pestering about trees and presents and holiday cards. She was starting to drive him up the wall.

He got it. He really did. She hadn't had a Christmas, a real Christmas, once in her life. She hadn't exactly gone into detail about her time in the lab. It wasn't exactly a topic they dwelled on, for long. It stirred up bad memories that both of them were keen to forget. But he'd been in that hellhole, and he'd seen her bedroom (more like a prison cell, really), and can't imagine, in a million parallel universes, that she ever celebrated Christmas. No presents. No decorations. No caroling and awkward family gatherings and Bing Crosby's "Merry Christmas" album. Just stark walls and cold hallways and sensory deprivation tanks.

He got it. But some twisted part of him wasn't ready to deal with it, yet. The prospect of having a kid, during Christmastime. A kid that wasn't Sara.

Sure, they spent last Christmas together. But it hardly counted. She was starving and semi-conscious and so, so tired. And he was wrestling with the idea of taking her in, hiding her, giving her all those things he tried so, so hard to give her. A home. A family.

So, this was, by his standards, their first real Christmas together. And he didn't have the patience, or the courage, to deal with it. Especially not right now. He was an hour late for his shift at the Police station, searching for the keys to his Blazer in the pockets of his coat, attempting to slip out of the cabin unnoticed, when El cornered him and started chattering away about *inviting the Byers and Mike over for Christmas dinner, and what do you think I should get Mike for a Christmas present and do you prefer red tinsel or silver for the mantelshelf?*

"Kid, I really gotta go, alright?"

"But . . ."

"No buts. We'll talk about it later."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Hopper retrieved his keys from behind the cushions on the sofa and crossed the room, kissing her forehead. He slipped out the door and into the chilly December morning. It had yet to snow, but a layer of frost covered the pine needles and dead leaves that littered the ground, crunching under his feet. He started the Blazer, giving it a moment to warm up. He rubbed his bare hands together, trying to tease some warmth into his fingers. Even inside the car, he could see his breath. He fiddled with the A/C, trying to get warm air blowing through the vents, but it didn't do any good. The damn thing broke years ago.

He pulled onto the road, heading for the station. He'd barely set foot into the station when Flo attacked him, demanding an explanation for his lateness, yanking the cigarette from his mouth.

"Jesus, Flo! I couldn't find my keys, alright?" He said, pushing past her, pouring himself a cup of coffee. She huffed, incredulous, and sat down at her desk. Callahan quirked an eyebrow.

"You should've radioed, man, we've got a real emergency."

Hopper paused, growing cold.

"What kind of emergency?"

"Some kids stole Mr. Larson's garden gnomes, again." Callahan said, gravely.

"Fuck you and the horse you rode in on, Cal." Hopper said, sighing, and left. He went into his office, shut the door, and tried to steal a few minutes of peace.

Six and a half hours later, after numerous calls and a shit ton of filing, he took his lunch, deciding to go up the street for a drink at Hal's.

He took a seat by the window and ordered a beer. The waitress brought him one, and he took a sip, glancing around the place. It was old, dark and stank of fried food and tobacco. Hopper watched a Dunkin Donuts commercial, displayed on clunky, old T.V. in the corner. Touches of holiday festivities hung about the place. The radio belched out a staticky version of "White Christmas", and a string of multi-color lights decorated the wall. Hopper sighed, raising the beer to his lips.

El would wear him down, one of these days. He knew he couldn't exactly ignore Christmas, he couldn't make it go away. He knew she was expecting a textbook Christmas. One with a turkey dinner, with presents, with cookies and gingerbread houses and a stocking full of goodies. After all she'd been through, after everything they'd been through, *together*, who was he to deny her of that?

He chewed his lip, glancing out the window.

He wasn't exactly a textbook dad. Theirs wasn't exactly a textbook family. How could he give her that kind of Christmas, when he'd spent so many Christmases chasing a ghost?

The holidays were just that much harder, without her.

He checked his watch, groaned, and downed the rest of his drink in one swallow. He had to get back to the station. He threw a couple dollar bills on the table and straightened. Something caught his attention, out the window. He froze, glancing up the street.

A little girl stood on the street corner, staring at him. His heart crawled into his throat. Something cold and heavy settled in his gut.

It was Sara.

She smiled at him, cocking her head, blonde pigtails bouncing.

"Sara?" He said, hoarsely. His brain struggled to piece this information together, to make sense of it, while the rest of him moved toward the exit. He wrenched open the door, stumbling down the steps and onto the sidewalk. She turned on her heel and ran, disappearing around the corner. He bolted after her, hurrying down

the walk and around the corner, just in time to catch sight of her blue coat as it whipped out of sight.

"Sara!" He called. A stitch grew in his side, and his breath came in large, wheezing gasps. Still, he ran, down Main and onto a side street. She remained out of reach, just ahead, and he'd catch a glimpse a glimpse of her, as she fled. Eventually, he lost sight of her, altogether. He paused, clutching his side, panting, chest aching. Vaguely, he wondered if he was having a heart attack.

"Gotta quit the damn cigarettes." He muttered to himself, drawing a breath. He laughed, but the sound was broken and twisted. He was ridiculous. He'd really fallen off the edge this time, hadn't he? Jesus, he was off his rocker. It couldn't have been her. It was all in his head. He had to stop. This had to end. He told himself this, over and over, and still, he didn't believe a word of it.

Because he had seen her.

His girl.

Sara.

He shook his head, ringing his hands. He straightened and glanced him around. He was on the corner of Second and Bishop. A couple shops lined the street. The empty lot where he stood had been string with lights and transformed into a Christmas Tree Lot. He could see the evergreens, lined up in rows. He laughed, again. She'd led him to a fucking Christmas Tree Lot. He bit his lip, staring at his shoes. He reached inside his jacket and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his jacket pocket. He stuck one in his mouth, lit it, and took a few drags, trying to dispel the tightness in his chest. He steeled himself, considering his options, and walked across the parking lot.

He walked the aisles, between the trees, running his hands along the branches, absently, searching for a promising candidate. The lot was already picked over, with not much to choose from but a few stunted or lopsided trees. None of them seemed right.

He and Sara always got the tree, every Christmas. She liked to pick out the biggest one. They'd load it on top of the Blazer and haul it

home, and he'd help her string up tinsel and strings of popcorn. Diane would unwrap the ornaments, and they'd hang them. After they finished, he'd drag a stool into the living room, and Sara would stand on her tip-toes on the top step and put the topper on the tree. It was something they did. *Together*.

"Screw it."

He radioed Flo on the way home.

"I'm heading home early, Flo." He said. "Get Harrington to cover. The kid's desperate for something to do. You keep him cooped up in the office all day, teaching him knitting patterns. He could use a change of scenery."

"Hop . . ."

"Flo, you're the best." He said, cutting her off. He switched off the radio, lips twitching into a smile.

He pulled up, in front of the cabin, and switched off the engine. He went inside the cabin, surprised to find the door unlocked. He grumbled, making a mental note to remind the kid about that, later.

He found her asleep on the couch, in the middle of a paper cutting explosion. Paper snowflakes and holiday cards with crude drawings of snowmen and reindeer on the front littered the sofa, the floor, the coffee table. There were paper clippings in her hair. It looked like the Wheeler kid had come by, earlier. He looked at the cards, at the Wheeler's neat handwriting next to El's slightly crooked letters. Printed on one of the cards, one featuring a drawing of two smiling stick figures wearing Santa hats, were the words *For Dad*. His heart skipped a beat, and his eyes began to water, treacherously. El stirred, sleepily, muttering. He shook her shoulder, gently.

"Hey, Ellie." He said. Her large, brown, orblike eyes opened. She blinked, puzzled, and yawned.

"Whasthematter?" She muttered.

"I've got a surprise. Get your coat."

He watched the road as it wound its way through the countryside. El leaned against the window, watching the world flick by. He stole a glance at her.

"Where are we going?" She asked, suspiciously.

"You'll see."

"I don't like surprises." She said, looking at him. She stuck out her bottom lip. Hopper barked a laugh.

"This is a good surprise. I promise."

Eventually, he pulled off the highway and parked the car. He got out, and grabbed the axe he brought, from the backseat. El climbed out of the car, looking at him, expectantly.

He cleared his throat.

"We're gonna cut down a Christmas tree. It's time you finally had a Christmas, Ellie. A proper Christmas."

And out here, she wouldn't be seen. They could find a tree, the right tree, together. He didn't voice this, out loud, content to keep such a sentiment tucked away.

El's eyes widened. Her mouth stretched into a broad grin.

Hopper smiled.

"C'mon." He shouldered the axe, took her hand. They trudged through the dead leaves, through the woods.

Hopper inspected each tree, as they passed. He squeezed her hand.

"Which tree, d'ya think?"

El glanced around, scrutinizing every branch and needle. She frowned, pointed.

"That one."

"That big, crooked one?"

"No." She said, impatiently. "*That* one, behind it." She jabbed a finger at it. Hopper craned his neck. Sure enough, hiding behind the enormous, misshapen tree, there was a smaller one. It wasn't perfect, balding in places and bent in others, but it would do.

"You sure?" Hopper said. "I kinda like that one." He gestured to the gargantuan tree, beside it. El slapped his arm, playfully, laughing.

"Yes. This one." She looked at it, fondly. "This one is perfect."

"Alright, kiddo. Stand back." She did, and he took aim, swinging the axe against the trunk.

"Christ." He muttered. He took a few more swings, and paused, for breath. Sweat beaded on his upper lip. He looked at El, apologetically.

"Harder than it looks." He explained, and took another swing. After a half-hour of hacking, the tree began to sway. If El gave it a telekinetic nudge, he didn't mention it. It fell, with a thud, and Hopper grinned. El carried the axe while he picked up the trunk and began to drag it, through the woods. El followed him, dutifully, as he huffed and puffed and hauled the damn thing to the car.

"Heavier than it looks." He muttered, and El grinned. Something cold and wet slipped down the collar of his jacket, and Hop glanced at the grey sky. A light snow had begun to fall. El smiled, holding her palm out, toward the sky.

"Snowing." She reported.

"Sure is." He said. She smiled, and stuck her tongue out, catching flakes in her mouth.

After an eternity, they reached the Blazer. He strapped the tree on the roof, and stood back, admiring his handiwork.

"It's a beauty." He said, brushing dust and needles from his jacket. El hummed, in agreement. There were snowflakes stuck in her eyelashes.

At home, El helped him stand it up in the living room. Hopper fished

the box labeled "Xmas" from the basement. While El strung popcorn on a fishing wire, he untangled the mess of Christmas lights. He yanked on a knot, and it unraveled, only to form another knot.

"Shit." He swore.

"Language." She said, and shot him a look. Hopper chuckled. He finished untangling the lights and strung them around the tree, and El hung her popcorn and tinsel.

He'd set up a little radio on the kitchen table, and it spouted Christmas carols. El danced along, sock-feet tapping, unruly mess of curls bouncing.

She hung the ornaments, next, while Hopper searched for damn tree topper. He found it, in a separate box of random junk, in the corner of the basement. Hopper resurfaced, closing the door to the basement, and found El standing back, admiring the tree.

"It's done." She said, in a hushed voice.

"Not yet." He held up the gold, wire star. "It needs a topper."

"Top-er?" El said, trying out the word. She looked at him, puzzled. "Yeah, it goes on the very top of the tree. It's a finishing touch."

"A finishing touch." El echoed.

"Yeah, you wanna do the honors?" Hopper asked. She nodded.

"Here, lemme get you something to stand on, I don't think you'll . . ." He stopped, watching as the tree topper floated through the air, fixing itself on the topmost branch. He looked at her, rubbing a hand over his stubble.

"Pretty sure that's cheating, but I'll let it slide." Hopper said, and El giggled. He ruffled her curls, then drew her into a hug.

"Nice work, kid."

They ate T.V. dinners on the sofa and watched Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. He carried El to bed, after the credits began to

scroll, onscreen. He pulled the blankets up to her chin, switched off the lamp.

"I like our tree." She muttered, stifling a yawn.

"Me too, kid." He said.

"Can we do more Christmas things?"

"Like what?"

"Caroling." She said.

Hopper sighed.

"I don't sing. And you can't be seen in public. So, I'm gonna go with no."

"Oh."

"Don't worry, kiddo. We'll do other stuff."

"Promise?"

"Promise?"

He made toward the door.

"Dad?"

"Hmmm?"

"Goodnight."

"Night, Ellie."

In the living room, he threw away the remains of their meal in the trash, and began collecting the scraps of tissue paper, strewn about. El's holiday card caught his attention. He sat on the sofa, picking it up. He glanced at her open door, at her curls, just visible under the pile of blankets and pillows heaped on her bed. She'd kill him if she knew he read it, but he couldn't help himself.

He opened the card, hating himself.

Inside, her slanting, jagged handwriting reads:

Dad,

*Thank you for giving me a home and a family and Eggos. I love you.
Merry Christmas.*

- El

He smiled, despite himself, and dashed a tear from his cheek.

20. Christmas Pt. 2

They celebrated Christmas Eve at the Byers' house. El stood on the porch, beside Hopper, as he drummed his knuckles on their front door, with its chipping paint and smudged glass panes. She shifted her weight, tugging nervously at the collar of her black sweater. She had on a knee-length, plaid skirt and a pair of black flats. Hand-me-downs, from Nancy.

A muffled thundering of footsteps sounded from the other side of the door, and El stepped back, surprised and elated, as the door burst open and Will engulfed her in a tight hug. She hugged him back, squealing in delight. Will drew back, grinning broadly. He was wearing an awful Christmas sweater, a red one with the shape of Christmas tree haphazardly stitched on the front, and a smattering of silver and gold pom-poms. El giggled, noticing a pit of mashed potato clumped in Will's hair, and reached up to brush it away. Will flinched, involuntarily, and El shrunk back.

"You've got . . . a little something in your hair." El said, quickly. He shrugged, embarrassed, and reached up to flick it away.

"I was helping my mom cook." He explained, sheepishly. He glanced at Hopper.

"Hey, Chief."

"Hey, yourself." Hop said, and smiled. Will grinned, then remembered himself.

"C'mon in, guys. It's freezing." He held the door open, wider, and El stepped over the threshold. The Byers' house was warm and inviting. A fire crackled on the hearth, and the house had returned to something resembling normalcy, since last November. Will's drawings of the vines and tunnels leading to the Upside Down had been taken down, and the furniture returned to its original place. Joyce had found the demodog in the fridge the previous day, and it Hopper had burned it in the backyard, much to Dustin's dismay.

"You can't! This is literally the most ground-breaking scientific discovery

the world had ever seen and you want to burn it?"

"It tried to eat us, Dustin."

"So?"

"Welcome!" She said, and embraced El. El wrapped her arms around the older woman, feeling her breath hitch in her throat. She loved Joyce. She loved the woman's energy, her nurturing nature, her ability to go from friendly and soft-spoken and wild and fiercely protective in an instant. Joyce was the closest thing to a mother El had, would probably ever have.

"How're you holding up, Sweetie?" Joyce asked, smiling, caressing her cheek.

"I'm good." El said.

"Good." Joyce said, ruffling her curls. She turned to Hopper.

"Hey." She said, looking at him. A ghost of a smile tugged on Hopper's lips.

"Hey." Hop said, and hugged her. El watched the brief exchange, feeling a warm bubble inflate in her chest. She watched enough soap operas to sense that unspoken *something* going on, between them. Though Hop assured her that nothing had happened or would happen (ever!), she held on to the shred of hope that Hop would act on the feelings El knew he had for Joyce, and that it would eventually lead somewhere. El couldn't help but imagine what it would be like if Hop and Joyce were in love. If they Joyce was her Mama, for real . . . She smiled, despite herself. *A kid can dream*. That's what Hop said, every time she asked him about Joyce.

She knew him well enough to see through his first line of defense. He build walls. He was good at it. Almost as good as El. She could see the way he looked at Joyce, though. The way his eyes were unfailingly drawn to her. Few things could ease that perpetual tension in every cell of his body. Few things could lower his shoulders from around his ears. One was El's hand, clutched in his. The other was a word from a Joyce. One word, that was all it took.

One word, and he fell apart. Much like El, Joyce knew how to find the chinks in his armor. He was prickly on the outside and chocolate pudding on the inside. Funny thing was, so was Joyce.

El grinned at her dad over Joyce's shoulder and waggled her eyebrows. He shot her a look, one that said *don't start*, and it only made El's smile grow wider.

Hop cleared his throat, shoving the a bottle of wine he'd brought roughly into Joyce's hands.

Joyce smiled, taking it in stride.

"This'll go great with dinner." She said, pleased. "Thanks, Hop."

"Don't mention it."

Just then, they heard the rumble of a car engine outside, and Jonathan came through the door a moment later, knocking snow from his boots, a bag of groceries in one hand.

"Hop, El, hey . . ." He said, shaking Hopper's hand and pulling El into a one-armed hug. El hummed, pleased, returning his hug.

"Make yourself at home. Dinner's in an hour." Joyce said, disappearing into the kitchen. Jonathan followed her with the groceries, and Will sat down with El on the sofa while Hop settled into an armchair, turning on the football game. Will crossed to the turntable and put on Bing Crosby's Christmas album.

They played games for a while. Will taught her how to play chess and checkers. After a few beers, Hop taught them how to play poker for Hershey Kisses.

El lay back on the sofa, eating her winnings, heart so full and light she felt as if it might burst.

"Will, could you help me, for a sec?" Joyce called, from the kitchen. He went, and El jumped up from the couch, following him into the kitchen. They set the table for her. Will laid the placemats on the dining room table, and El followed with the plates and silverware. In the kitchen. Joyce handed El a gravy boat.

"Set that on the table, will you?"

El nodded, crossing the room. Her foot caught on the rug, by the sink, and she lurched forward, losing her balance. The gravy boat shattered on the floor, and gravy spilled in all directions. El froze, hand clamping over her mouth, vision tunneling.

"No." She whispered, while Joyce hurried to grab a wad of paper towel, trying to assure her it was fine, that she didn't need to worry, it wasn't a big deal, at all, but El didn't hear her. She couldn't hear anything but the pounding of blood in her ears. Her mouth went dry, her body cold.

"No." She whispered, again, and Hopper appeared in the doorway, looking at the mess. "No . . ."

"El . . ." Hopper began, but El shook her head furiously, balling her hands into fists, looking fearfully from Joyce to Hopper and back again.

Without thinking, she turned on her heel, crossing to the entryway and wrenching open the door. She could barely see for the tears spilling over her eyelids, and all she could do was put one foot in front of the other as a million, violent, shadowed thoughts raced through her head.

You don't deserve this, Eleven.

You can't have a normal family. You don't belong here.

Why can't you do anything right?

You hurt people.

You break things. You tear people apart. And everything you touch gets ruined, Eleven. Can't you see? You don't belong here.

You're worthless.

You've got a wound. A terrible wound. A festering wound . . .

She wound up on her hands and knees in Castle Byers, shivering in

the cold, hot, ugly tears running the length of her face, dripping from her nose and chin. She drew her knees up to her chest and began to scream until she ran out of oxygen, and the sound broke off into a choked gasp. She clamped a hand over her mouth, sobs wracking her body, driving an ache deep into her muscles, in the marrow of her bones. A drop of blood peaks from under her left nostril, and she doesn't bother wiping it away.

It took Hopper a while to find her, there, in the fort that neither of the Byers boys use much, nowadays. He drew back the fraying blanket and freezes. She didn't give any indication she noticed his presence. She was huddle against the far wall, silent and shaking, looking so cold and fragile and scared. He's both amazed and terrified how quickly it can shift in an instant, how he can blink and she's the broken girl from the lab again. Pale and bruised and thin, god, way too thin. How she crumbles right before his eyes. He has to remind himself her scars aren't ever going to go away. Not really. They can keep up the charade for a while, sure, until one of them ends up in a ball in the floor, screaming at things only she can see, and he just holds her, wishing for a cigarette, a drink, anything. He holds her and God, he wishes he could help her. Seeing her like this . . . it breaks him.

Hopper has to duck to avoid hitting his head on the fort's wood-tarp ceiling. He kneels beside El, puts a hand on his shoulder. She flinches away, and his heart crawls into his throat.

"Nobody blames you, Ellie." Hop said. "It was an accident. It's not your fault, alright?" He craned his neck, trying to get a good look at her face, trying to gauge her current mental state. But she was facing away from him.

"Look at me, El." He said. She didn't budge.

"El, c'mon. I just wanna know you're okay."

She shifted, a little, and turned, peering at him through the cracks in her fingers.

Gently, he pried one of her hands away from her face and clasped it in both of his, giving it a small squeeze. It was a simple gesture, a

familiar one, enough to ground her in the present, to draw her away from the shadows and the monsters in that place, inside her own head.

"El, it's not your fault. It's not worth getting upset over, it's just a dish."

She sniffed, still hiding half her face with her other hand.

"I . . . I broke it."

"It was an accident."

"I hurt . . . Joyce." She said.

"You didn't." Hop said. "It's just a dish." El shakes her head furiously.

"You didn't see . . . Joyce . . ." She sniffed, barely able to get the words out. It was true, he didn't see what El saw. He didn't see the look on Joyce's face, when it shattered. He didn't see the flicker of regret, of loss and pain, that flashed across her face in that moment.

"It . . . it mattered, to her." El said. "And I broke it." El dissolved into a fresh wave of tears, and Hopper enfolded her into a hug. She buried her face in the folds of his jacket, sniffing, fighting for breath.

Hopper sighed, wishing he could break through her defenses. Wishing she would let him in, let him take this pain away. He knew it was more than the dish. He knew she had so many layers, so many dark, hidden parts of her she scarcely let him see. And that scared him, to think that they were family now, that she was his daughter and he didn't even know her.

"El, it's not your fault." He said, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice, the panic and shame and fear rising in his throat like bile.

She cried and cried, into his shoulder. She clung to him tightly, and he held her, talking to her, trying to reach into those dark, hidden parts of her and ease the storm inside her mind. It took a long time for her to finally calm down. When she did, she drew away, mopping her face. She hiccupped, looking at him. The look in her eyes scared him. They were dark, clouded pools. Distant. Not really there.

"In the lab, I broke . . . I broke something. A machine. For recording . . . stuff. It had a needle, that went back and forth, with black lines . . ." El told him, holding up her finger and moving it back and forth, rapidly.

"An EEG." Hopper said, nodding. "It measures your brain activity." They'd hooked Will up to one of those things, in the lab.

"E-E-G." El said, spelling it out. She nodded. "Yes, I think so." She paused, drawing a shaky breath. She squeezed her eyes shut. She looked a thousand years old.

"I broke it. Papa . . ." She trailed off, looking fearful at the mention of that bastard's name, and Hopper had to fight the sudden urge to break something.

"Brenner." She corrected herself, brow furrowing. "Brenner wanted me to . . . to hurt someone. A man. And I didn't want to do it. And I got angry. I broke it. The pieces, they fell on the floor, and the needle stopped moving and the machine caught fire. I didn't do it on purpose, it just . . . it just happened." El said.

It was the first time she'd voluntarily told him about her time in the lab. She spoke quickly, without pausing for breath. She spat the words out like they were poison, with this determined look in her eyes. Like the faster she got through it, the sooner she could forget it. Hopper held his breath, heavy dread settling in the pit of his stomach. She turned, looking at him, tears shining in her eyes.

"They locked me in the room." She said, and sniffed. "They told me I was bad."

"I didn't like the room. It was dark, and cold. And there wasn't food. And I was alone." She paused. "I didn't like to be alone in the room."

Hopper's heart sank through the floor. He bit his lip, blink back tears that threatened to spill over his eyelashes.

"Dammnit, El." He whispered, slamming his fist against a wooden beam, supporting Castle Byers. El jumped, startled. She took her hand away, looking at Hopper with wide eyes.

"Mad?" She asked, in a hushed voice. And Hopper realized she thought he was angry with her. The absurdity of the idea almost made him laugh.

"Mad?" Hopper asked, and shook his head, blowing out a long breath. "No, I'm not mad."

"Upset." She decided, and her small hand once again took up residence in his larger one.

"I just don't like to see my girl hurting, is all." He said. El's brow furrowed. She reached up, wiped a tear from his face. She squeezed his hand.

"I'm not hurting." She said. "Not anymore."

She wrapped her arms around him, and Hopper's hand came up to stroke her curls.

"I'm sorry I made you upset."

"You didn't make me upset, El." Hopper said, quickly. "And I'm glad you told me that stuff, okay? I'm so, so glad you told me. Understand?"

And he was. So, so fucking glad that she finally worked up the courage to share with him a piece of her life he hadn't been a part of. A part of her life that caused her so much pain and anguish, every day. A part of her life he couldn't begin to understand, but he tried. Damnit, he tried. He tried so fucking hard to understand. He felt like she'd given him a gift.

El nodded, and Hopper laughed, relieved. "I don't want you to feel like you ever have to keep secrets from me, El. We're a team, now. We're family. And if this is gonna work, we can't keep secrets. We can't lie to each other. I'm done with the lies and the secrets. And I know that some things take time, but you know what, Ellie? We've got it. We've got all the time in the world to figure this stuff out." He looked at her. "You can talk to me. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And we'll figure it out, together."

Eventually, Hopper convinced her to return to the Byers' house. He wrapped an arm around her, and they walked back through the snow and woods. Joyce, Jonathan, and Will stood in the entry, waiting for them. El went straight to Joyce and hugged her, tightly.

"I'm sorry I broke your gravy boat."

"Oh, honey, it's okay. I'll get a new one. It's no biggie."

El withdrew, looking at her, brow creasing.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

They five of them sat down, to eat. The turkey was a bit cold, but it tasted good, anyway. In fact, El thought it might've been the best thing she'd ever tasted. Aside from Hopper's famous Tripe-Decker Eggo Extravaganza, of course.

Hopper let her try a sip of wine. She wrinkled her nose, disgusted. Hopper barked a laugh.

"Yeah, let's save that 'till you're old enough, kid."

After the plates had been cleared away, El and Will did the dishes. El scrubbed the plates and Will dried them, and then all five of them sat down in front of the fire to watch *Frosty the Snowman* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, both of which El had seen a million times, but they were still great, anyway. Joyce passed around a plate of semi-burnt Christmas cookies. El took one, shaped like a star, and handed the plate to Hop.

"Nah, kiddo, I'll pass." He looked at Joyce, massaging his stomach. "If I eat another bite, I'll explode. You'll have to scrape me off the walls."

Will frowned.

"Gross."

As the credits began to roll, after *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, Joyce handed Will, Jonathan, and El a box, each.

Joyce said, excitedly. El took it, puzzled.

"Alrighty, don't open them, yet. Lemme get the camera."

El looked at the box, in her hands. It was rectangular, wrapped in red paper and tied with a ribbon. She looked at Hopper, cocking an eyebrow. He shrugged, raising his glass to his lips, taking a sip of wine.

"Okay, smile!" Joyce said. Jonathan wrapped an arm around them both, and El smiled at the camera.

"Okay, go ahead."

El tore the paper off the box, opening it, feeling a swoopy, fluttery feeling in her stomach. Her first ever Christmas gift . . .

It was . . .

"Pajamas." Will said. "Wow, thanks Mom." He said, clearly unenthusiastic.

El lifted her own pair of pajamas out of the box. They were pink and fuzzy and soft. She grinned, delighted, rubbing the fleece against her cheek. They were perfect.

Will turned to her.

"We get pajamas every year." He explained, shrugging.

"It's tradition!" Joyce exclaimed, ruffling Will's hair, playfully.

"Tradition?" El repeated, puzzled.

"It's something you do every year, for a celebration." Will explained. El nodded.

"Do you like them?" She asked. El smiled, and hugged Joyce, tightly.

"I love them. Thank you." She said. Joyce smiled, hugged her back.

"You're very welcome, honey. Merry Christmas."

El pulled away, and Joyce turned to Hop, practically jumping up and down.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" She retrieved another, larger, box from under the tree and shoved it into Hopper's hands.

"That's for you!"

"Joyce, I didn't . . . I didn't get you anything."

"Don't be silly, open it!"

He did. Inside, a pair of pajamas, too. Pink and fleece, perfectly identical with El's. Hopper looked at Joyce, incredulous.

"I . . . I don't know what to say." Hop said, suppressing a laugh.

"You can take them back." Joyce said. "But I couldn't resist."

"No." Hop said, defensively. "I like them. I really do. Thank you."

He hugged her. They broke apart, and Hop glanced up, brow furrowing.

"Is that mistletoe?" He said, pointing to the ceiling. Sure enough, a little plant, studded with little white berries, hung from a low beam, above their heads.

"Weird . . ." Joyce said, suppressing a giggle.

"Well, I guess we know what that means . . ." Hop said, shooting El a look. El held up her hands in mock-surrender. Hop ducked his head, and planted a brief peck on Joyce's cheek.

"You're an idiot, Jim Hopper."

El woke up on Christmas day with butterflies in her stomach. She leapt out of bed, galloping into Hopper's room. She pounced on him, shaking his shoulder.

"Get up!" It's Christmas." She said. He groaned, shielding his face, and rolled over, pressing his face into the pillow.

"Sara, it's five o' clock in the morning."

El rolled her eyes.

"Dad, c'mon . . . Please?"

Hop rubbed his eyes, sitting up.

"Alright, Ellie. Gimme a minute, will you?"

She did, creeping down the living room in stocking feet. She settled herself on the couch, glancing at the wrapped gifts around the tree, at her stocking, hanging above the fireplace. Hopper padded down the hall, in his new, pink pajamas. El attempted, unsuccessfully, to suppress a giggle. Hop shot her a look and went promptly into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee.

He settled on the sofa, beside her, carrying his mug. He set it on the coffee table and rubbed his hands together, shivering.

"It's freezing." He said, getting to his feet. He grabbed a log and a box of matches, off the mantel, and set about building a fire. El flicked her head, and the dial on the space heater in the corner turned to full blast. After an eternity, Hopper sat back, a nascent fire crackling in the hearth.

Hopper smiled, taking a sip of coffee.

"Which one are ya gonna open first?" He asked.

El inspected the pile of gifts.

"You go first." She said. Hopper laughed.

"Kid, I haven't gotten a Christmas gift for a long time. It's your day, El. Open 'em up. Knock yourself out.

"That's not true." El said, tugging on his sleeve. Hop glanced at his fleece pajamas. He snorted, eyes crinkling as a smile stretched across

his face.

"Yeah, well. This doesn't count. It's a gag gift."

"Gag . . . gift?"

"A joke." He explained.

"Not funny." She said, wrinkling her nose. "I like them. They're nice." Hop quirked an eyebrow, chuckling.

"Well, they're pretty damn comfortable."

El laughed.

"Well, are we gonna sit around here all day, contemplating my marvelous new jammies, or are you going to open your gifts, before I send them all back?"

El looked at him, reproachful.

"Nevermind, kid. I'm teasing."

"Wait." El said, and jumped up, running down the hall. When she came back, she was carrying a small box in her arms.

She gave it to Hopper.

"Open it."

He looked at it. It was haphazardly wrapped. It looked as if she'd used the entire world's supply of scotch tape and then some.

"El . . ."

"Open it." She said, again. He did, peeling off the wrapping paper. Inside was a handsome, new wallet. He smiled.

"Joyce helped me pick it out." She explained. "She said you'd like it."

"I do." He said.

"And, look . . ." El said, taking it. She opened it, and handed it back to

him. A photo of the El and Hop—standing in the snow, his arms wrapped around her, both of them grinning, broadly—was tucked inside the folds of the wallet.

"Jonathan took the picture. He gave it to me, so I could put it in here."

"It's perfect." He said, and hugged her. "Thank you."

El opened her gifts, next. Hop had given her a new sweater, a hat, the Star Wars Trilogy on VHS, and a pair of snow boots. Her stocking, much to her utter delight, contained a box of Eggos.

She hugged him, eyes alight.

"Thank you," she breathed, "for everything."

"Merry Christmas, kiddo." Hopper said, chuckling. El put on the sweater and hat. She held up the VHS tapes.

"Want to watch them, right now?"

"Kid, I've seen Star Wars a thousand times." Hopper groaned.

"Please?"

"Fine."

El squealed, delighted, and crossed to the T.V., inserting the tape. Hop went into the kitchen to start breakfast, mixing pancake batter in a bowl, warming the stovetop.

He felt light and warm, and happier than he'd been in a long, long time. All his agonizing over the holidays had been pointless. Christmas with El felt like the most normal thing in the world. He glanced at her, wrapped up in her sweater, a size too big, brown eyes glued to the television, and felt his heart swell.

A sharp rap on the door startled Hop out of his thoughts. He paused, listening, gut twisting into a knot. El looked at him, startled. Muffled voices, shuffling of feet, and then a second knock. This time, the knock they recognized. Two. One. Three.

The clocks clicked, and a gaggle of rowdy teenagers tumbled into his living room. Mike, leading the pack, swept El into a hug. She giggled, surprised and overjoyed, and hugged him back.

"Alright, alright, enough P.D.A." Dustin yelled, and shoved Mike aside. After each of the party members had hugged her, in turn, Hopper cleared his throat.

"What's this about, don't you kids have families to be with?"

"We couldn't forget about El on her first Christmas!" Dustin exclaimed, fiercely. "Plus, we've gotta give her our gift!"

Dustin made a big show of presenting her a big, wrapped box. The party watched, wide-eyed, as El ceremoniously ripped the paper off and opened it. Inside, a brand-new Supercom sat, wrapped in tissue paper. El's eyes welled with tears.

"Now you can talk to us, El. You don't have to use your powers, you can use this." Mike said, lifting it from the box, helping her switch it on. El fiddled with the dials, delighted.

"We'll keep our coms switched on to Channel Eleven. It's secure, I made sure." Lucas assured her.

"But we should call you 'Jane', instead of El." Mike said. "It's safer, that way."

"Jesus, how'd you kids afford this?" Hopper said, sinking into the sofa. El handed him the com, and he ran his fingernail along the side of it, turning it over in his hands

"We all pitched in." Will smiled, sheepishly. "It's no big deal."

"You're one of the party, now!" Lucas exclaimed.

"She was always one of the party, Lucas!" Mike said, elbowing his friend in the ribs.

"Yeah, well, you're officially one of the party."

"You were always official." Mike mumbled, rolling his eyes. El

giggled. Dustin cleared his throat.

"I hereby christen you, Jane "El" Hopper, as the party's official mage and resident badass." Dustin said, and touched her on each shoulder, as if dubbing a knight. She accepted to honor graciously, all the while resisting the urge to roll her eyes.

"Thank you." She looked around at them, all of them, beaming with happiness and gratitude, for her friends, for the family she made for herself.

El remembered herself, suddenly, and rushed down the hall to retrieve the Christmas cards she made for all of them. The party gushed over her stick-figure versions of Santa Clause and snowmen and reindeer.

Hopper offered to make pancakes for all of them, and El and the rest of the party settled down in front of the T.V. to watch *Star Wars: A New Hope*. The opening crawl appeared on screen, and the theme music began to blare. Dustin, who'd been talking to Max in a loud whisper, gave a soft groan of pain as someone's foot silenced him. Most of the party settled on the floor with blankets and pillows. Somehow, El won sofa privileges, and to no one's surprise, Mike snagged the spot beside her. She rested her head against his shoulder, pressing her nose into the fabric of his sweater, breathing in the scent of him. Like snow and maple syrup and a touch of something Christmassy, too, like cinnamon or pine.

He leaned his cheek against her crown, taking her hand in his under the blanket shared between them. She could feel his smile.

"Merry Christmas, El."

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

21. The Whole Story

The day the truth came out about Chicago, about Eight, about El's little escapade, it was raining. That afternoon, a Sunday in early February, the rain came down in torrents—blurring the windows, pouring off the roof of the cabin, bathing everything in soft darkness and dancing sound. And there was tension in the air, too. Energy.

The last of the season's snow washed away with the rain, turned to slush and, eventually, puddles. It had been a warm winter. Every day, as the sun reached its peak, the snow began to sweat, only to freeze over again as the temperatures plummeted at night. The result: a sheet of ice, coating everything, making even the shortest trips (to the car, up the walk, down porch steps) a dangerous endeavor.

Hopper parked the Blazer and walked the short distance to the cabin, hood pulled over his head, shielding himself from the rain, the futility of the attempt not lost on him. He was already soaked to the bone, shivering, wanting nothing more than to escape to the safety and warmth of the cabin, to pull on some dry clothes, to pour himself a mug of coffee, maybe read the Sunday paper.

Finally, *finally*, he reached the steps. The locks clicked before he had time to knock. He huffed, exasperated, and went inside. El sat, perched on the kitchen counter, a book lying open on her lap, a half-eaten apple in one hand.

"El, what'd we talk about? Wait for my secret knock, alright? What if I'd been one of those lab bastards?

El shrugged.

"Knew it was you."

"Oh, you did, huh? And I assume you know exactly what I ate for

breakfast this morning, too?"

"French toast." She said, without missing a beat. "I made it for you, remember?"

"That's not the point."

She shot him a look, incredulous. Hopper sighed.

"You're too smart for your own good, you know that?"

El shrugged.

"I know."

Hopper shook his head, shedding his rain-soaked jacket, hanging it up.

"Smart-ass." He muttered, under his breath.

"Mouth-breather." She fired back.

After he'd replaced his wet clothes with dry ones, he went into the kitchen to make sandwiches for the two of them.

"El, you hun—"

There she was, curled up in a tangle of arms and legs and blankets a mop of curly hair, fast asleep. He smiled, and settled himself on the sofa, careful not to disturb her. He switched on the T.V., muted it, and contented himself with watching football reruns. Barely an hour passed when El began to toss and turn, muttering to herself. Hopper glanced at her sleeping form, tense, creases forming in the space between her brows. A muscle pulsed, in her jaw, and Hopper thought she must be clenching her teeth. She shook her head, frantically, eyeballs darting beneath her eyelids.

"No . . ." She moaned. "Kali, don't . . ." She began to scream. "Kali! Kali! Kali, don't! No, Kali . . ."

"El!"

Hopper sprang to his feet, hands on her shoulders, shaking her. She snapped awake, and an invisible force slammed into his chest, knocking the wind out of him. He staggered back, gasping. El sat up, clamping a hand over her mouth, real fear in her eyes. She jumped to her feet, backing with quick, careful steps into the corner of the room, not taking her eyes off him. Frantic, choked sobs forced their way out of her mouth.

"El . . ."

"I'm s-sorry." She choked. "I . . . I didn't m-mean . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"It's okay, El." Hopper said, holding up his hands.

"Just knocked the wind out of me, that's all. You didn't hurt me. I know you didn't mean it." He assured her, taking a measured step towards her. She flinched, pressing herself flat against the wall, fingernails grazing her temples as she knotted her fingers in her hair, on the verge of another panic attack. Hopper swore, under his breath.

He thought she'd gotten better. She hadn't had an episode in nearly two months. And the nightmares, though ever-present, were far and few between. But that was a damn lie, a false assurance. She'd never heal, completely. That was the shitty thing about trauma. It could (would) get better, but the nightmares would never really go away. She'd have to learn to live with the panic attacks, the anxiety, the flashbacks that took her from him, took her away to that terrible place that lived and festered and grew inside her own head.

He spoke to her, desperate to keep his lips moving, to keep talking. Hoping his voice would be enough to keep her from crossing that line. This one wasn't the worst they'd gotten through. She seemed to be in-between, fighting off the demons, inches away from the precipice.

"El, just breathe. I'm here, okay? You don't have to do this alone. You didn't hurt me. You could never hurt me, kiddo. I just need you to be here, with me. So I can help you, El. Please let me help you . . ."

She blinked. Once. Twice. She squinted, as if looking into a bright light. He could see the traces of tears on her cheeks, the doubt in her

face. Her hands fell, defeated, to her sides. He crossed the space between them in two easy strides and enfolded her in his arms. She fell, heavy and weak, against his chest. She sobbed.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. Shhhhhh, you're alright."

"I'm sorry." She said, again. "I'm so sorry."

He led her to the couch and sat her down. She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her sweater. He offered her a Kleenex, and she took it, grateful, dabbing at her eyes. She knotted it between her fingers, staring at the ground, fixedly. Thunder rumbled, outside.

"Who's Kali?" He asked, after a period of silence, punctuated only by her occasional, quiet sniffles.

El blinked, stunned.

"You said her name, in your sleep. Who is she?"

"No one." El blurted, looking frightened.

"El . . ." Hopper prompted, brows knitting. "No more secrets, remember?"

"I . . ." El began, and stopped, paling. Hopper, concerned, put a hand on her shoulder.

"Hey, it's okay. We'll talk when you're ready, if that's what you want . . ."

El squeezed her eyes shut, took a long, trembling breath.

"No." She said, in a hushed, breathy voice. "Friends don't lie." She looked at him. "Kali is my sister."

"What?"

"She's . . . like me. She can do things. Things other people can't." El said, pulling up her sleeve, revealing her tattoo, the numbers stamped into her skin, a permanent reminder of the lab, of the nightmares that lurked there.

"Number Eight."

Hopper rubbed a hand over his stubble, struggling to comprehend this revelation. He'd looked over the case files, everything about Hawkins Lab. He knew there had been others. He'd seen Eight's picture, but the file listed her whereabouts unknown. He'd been too preoccupied with keeping El safe and out of reach of Brenner and his goons to devote much thought to the other numbers, wherever they were.

"And you . . . you've met her? Do you see her in those dreams of yours? In your head?"

El nodded. Her face fell, and her eyes welled with tears, yet again.

"I . . . I lied." She says. "I went to see Mama, and then . . . and then I went to Chicago."

Hopper's mind reeled. His body grew cold.

"Chicago?"

It all came bursting out, after that. El told him about her trip to Chicago, about meeting Kali and her cronies, about hunting down Ray and nearly killing him. Hopper listened, stone-faced, feeling sick, as El recounted her story. She spoke until she can't speak anymore, until tears choked her words. At that point, she dissolved into terrible, heaving sobs, inconsolable, and Hopper's arms encircled her, once again. He could feel the beginnings of a headache itching in his temples, fought the desire for a cigarette. He held her, leaning his chin against her curls.

He knew she hadn't told him the whole truth, but this . . . this was beyond anything he'd imagined. His gut coiled into tight knots, and his heart ached with guilt and fear and blame.

It was his fault. He should've been here, with her. Parents don't leave their kids. How could he have been so fucking clueless? To leave her, when she'd spent her entire, short life aching for a constant, loved conditionally, raised as a lab rat and force-fed lies, used and manipulated and cast away . . . God, he was a fucking idiot. And he

fucked up big time. Of course she ran away. Of course she sought out the only remaining ties she had left, because he had his head so far up his ass he couldn't even bother to get home on time. It was all his fault . . .

He squeezed her shoulders, tighter, as if he could keep her there and keep her safe, forever. As if she could ever forgive him for the terrible things he'd done.

Eventually, she calmed down enough to pull away, to ask him, with big, brown eyes full of tears, if he was mad at her.

"Mad?" He laughed, but the sound was warped and twisted and broken. "El, I'm not mad. I don't blame you. It's my fault, alright? I screwed up."

El sniffs.

"Promise?"

"I promise. I'm not mad. Not even close. I'm just happy you told me." He said, and he meant it. "Okay?"

El nodded.

"No more secrets." She said.

Hopper nodded.

"No more secrets."

El waited until the sound of Hopper's rumbling snores filled the cabin. Carefully, she climbed out of bed and retrieved the folder she'd kept, stowed away, under her mattress. She crawled back onto the bed and settled herself, cross-legged, the folder balanced on her lap. Inside, she retrieved Kali's picture. She didn't need the picture to reach her, across the void, but it certainly helped. Carefully, painstakingly, she tied the blindfold around her head, clutching the picture tight to her chest.

She felt her body sinking, felt the bed and the walls and the cabin dissolve, around her. She sifted through the voices and the radio waves and the vast, empty space between them. When she opened her eyes, she stood in shallow water, surrounded by black.

El swallowed the lump in her throat, squaring her shoulders, taking a step. Two.

She squinted, as a shifting object appeared, far away. She crept toward Kali, and the only sound was that of her own breath and the water lapping at her ankles.

Kali lay on a thin mattress, covered only a threadbare blanket. The young woman was sleep, hands tucked up by her chin, curled in the fetal position. El knelt by the bed, tears welling in her eyes, a conflicted storm of emotions swirling inside her chest, so tangled and smeared together she couldn't begin to separate one from the other. Tentatively, El reached out, placed a hand on Kali's shoulder. Her eyes snapped open. A drop of blood appeared in her left nostril. Her hand closed around El's wrist, eyes locking on her face.

"Jane?"

22. A Silence With Sharp Teeth

He heard a crash—the sound of his mother's favorite vase, shattering on the floor—as he worked on his homework. He stiffened, listening. A series of thundering footsteps. A shout. A slammed door.

Mike stood, crossing the room, pausing at the foot of the basement steps. He placed a hand on the rail, ran his fingernail up the grain of the wood. He bit his lip, hesitant, a sinking, leaden feeling settling in his gut.

He found his mother kneeling on the floor, scooping up the shards of ceramic with her bare hands. Her cheeks were flushed, and—Mike's heart dropped—she was crying.

"Mom?" He asked, pausing in the doorway. He shifted his weight, trying to decide if he was wanted or needed, trying to decide if he dared enter the living room. The living room—a fortress. The living room, with all its broken pieces and muddled memories and a silence with sharp teeth. He supposed that's why he kept to the basement. It was easier to ignore it, easier to bury his head in the sand. To pretend that silence was music. To grit his teeth and get through each day without acknowledging the fact that his parents never spoke.

He didn't know if his parents ever loved each other, but there was a time when he, naively, believed they did. There was a time when they could, at least, pretend.

"Oh, Mike." His mother said, breathlessly. She sniffed, wiping her eyes, smearing mascara over her cheeks. She didn't meet his eyes, continued to brush the shards of ceramic into her hands. "It's okay, really . . ." She began, waving him off.

"Mom." He said, interrupting her, and stepped into the room. He knelt beside her, and began to pick up the stray pieces. She quiets, for a moment, reaching for a shard near the sofa.

A sharp edge cut across the skin of her palm, drawing blood. She hissed, gritting her teeth, cradling her hand.

"You okay?" He asked, grabbing her hand. She nodded, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"I'm fine, Michael." She said, and caressed his face, leaving smudge of blood across his cheek. "I'm fine. Just go, Mike."

"Mom . . ."

"Mike." She said, firmly. "I'm fine."

His chest felt heavy and tight, and his cheeks flushed. Tears sprang in his eyes. He blinked, furiously, eyes fixating on the floor. He wouldn't cry. Not here. Not now. Not in front of his mom. He hated crying in front of people. He felt too much, too deeply. He balled his hands into fists to conceal the way his fingers were trembling. He hated the way adults called him "sensitive" with that strange, sad look in their eyes. An adult kind of sadness.

But he couldn't stop the tears, and they blurred his vision. He was just so angry, and scared and sad. And he couldn't decide which one he wanted to be.

"Mom!" He yelled, and his voice broke.

"Michael . . ." His mother said, brows knitting. She reached for his hand, tried to take it. He wrenched it away. "Mike, what's wrong . . ."

"You keep pushing me away!" He said, unable to stop the words. The dam broke. "You push everyone away! You're sad. I know you're sad. You're not happy, here. You're not happy with us. And I know you pretend to be, but you're not."

"Mike . . ."

"Dad doesn't care, anymore. And you never talk! Ever!" He was screaming, now. "And it's quiet, all the time. And I hate it! I hate it!"

He reeled, running a hand through his hair, trying to make the room stop spinning. His mom reached for him, tears shining in her eyes. He wipes at his eyes.

"You don't love each other."

"Oh, Mike . . . baby . . ."

He backed away, and turned. He threw open the basement door and ran down the steps, taking them two at a time. Outside, he threw a leg over his bike and began to pedal, across the front lawn, down the street. He pedaled furiously, legs burning. His breath puffed out of his mouth in swirling, white clouds. He made a left, then a right, another left . . . Not paying attention, no destination in mind. He rode blindly through the quiet streets glazed with orange light, from the lampposts.

He rode until his muscles ached. His fingers and face were numb. Only now did he realize he'd fled from the house without a jacket. He stopped at a gas station on the corner, leaned his bike against the wall, and sat down. He rested his head in his hands, heaving a sob.

He shouldn't have left. He shouldn't have left his mother there, with a bleeding hand, with her favorite vase scattered all over the floor. He should've stayed. He should've told her he didn't mean all those things he said. Even if he did mean them. He should've said sorry.

But those things needed to be said. The silence had become unbearable.

They sleep in separate beds, he thought, why?

The thought was so unfamiliar and unwelcome that he immediately shoved it away, into the deep, dark reaches of his mind.

All the fight went out of him. He slumped forward, no longer angry or sad. Just empty. And somehow, the was a thousand times worse.

Headlights blinded him, for a moment. Mike squinted, making out the bold, black letters stamped across the door of the Chief's Blazer: Hawkins Police Dept. Mike jumped to his feet. The Blazer screeched to a halt, and Hopper opened the door, walking around the car. The man stopped in front of him, arms folded, unlit cigarette dangling from his lips.

"Chief, I . . ."

"What's goin' on, kid?" Hopper said, interrupting him.

"I . . ." Mike began, and trailed off. He folded his arms, shivered, averting his eyes.

"Come on, kid." He said, fishing a lighter out of his jacket pocket. He held it to his mouth, lit the cigarette, and took a long, slow drag. "I'm not gonna bite."

Mike fidgeted, uneasily. No words came. And a big, heavy silence stretched between them. Hopper puffed on his cigarette, studying him.

"How 'bout I take you home, with me? Huh? Get you warmed up, and we can sort this out." Mike looked at the Chief, considered his offer. Slowly, he nodded. Hopper loaded his bike into the back of the Blazer, and Mike clambered into the front seat, trying to rearrange his long, lanky limbs comfortably. He avoided the Chief's gaze. They pulled out of the gas station. The Chief flicked his cigarette out the window, coughed, fiddled with the radio. Tension hung between them. Mike reconsidered his decision, but the prospect of seeing El seemed too good an offer to reject. Plus, where else did he have to go? He couldn't go home. He didn't think he could face his mother. Guilt squirmed in his gut, like a trapped rodent.

They arrived at the cabin after a long ride spent in uneasy silence. Hopper shut off the engine, and Mike trailed after him through the woods, dark and full of shadows that seemed to come to life in his peripheral, the moment he looked away.

"Tripwire." Hopper mumbled, and Mike carefully stepped over it. Hopper performed the secret knock. Two-One-Three. The locks clicked, and he opened the door.

"El? El, look who decided to show up." Hopper called, as they entered. Footsteps thundered down the hall, and El appeared in the doorway, curls bouncing. She saw him, and a broad smile stretched across her face. She bounded over and threw her arms around him. He hugged her back. The dam in his chest threatened to burst, all over again, as he held her. She drew back. Her smile faded as she caught sight of the look on his face.

"Mike?" She asked, hushed. "What's wrong?" She brought a hand to

his cheek, brushed at the tear-tracks, there. Mike attempted a smile and failed, miserably. It was futile. She could read him like a book.

"I'm fine." Thankfully, he managed to keep his voice steady. She frowned.

"Friends don't lie."

Mike laughed—a sound like dead leaves, crunching under foot. Tight and strangled and dry.

"It's . . . it's nothing. It's my parents, that's all. They were fighting. They don't really . . . get along . . . " He trailed off, aware he'd probably said too much. He glanced at Hopper, nervously. Hopper laid a big, calloused hand on his shoulder.

"Wanna stay for dinner?"

They ate microwaved hot dogs on pap on the sofa. El sat beside him, so close their knees touched.

"You gonna be alright, kid?" Hopper said, after dinner. He nodded, drawing a shaky breath.

"Yeah. I just . . . I got in a fight, with my mom. They were yelling, and my grandma's vase broke. My mom was pretty upset. And I . . . I don't know. I just got mad. I yelled at her, too, and then I . . . I left."

Hopper nods.

"It's hard, kid. Hell, my parents didn't get along. Some people just . . . grow apart, y'know?"

Mike nods, feels that horrible, hard lump growing in his throat.

"I shouldn't have left."

Hopper shook his head.

"Why don't you sleep here, tonight? I'll call your mom. We'll straighten this out."

El's eyes lit up. She looked at him, hopeful. Mike squeezed her hand.

"I'd like that."

El retrieved an old, raggedy sleeping bag from the basement, and he laid it out on the floor, by her bed. While she changed into her pajamas, he went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. The front door hung ajar. Mike crossed the room, curious, and peered outside. Hopper leaned against the porch railing, puffing a cigarette.

"Those things will kill you, y'know." Mike said, joining the Chief. Hopper glowered at him, cocking an eyebrow.

"So I've heard." He replied, stone-faced. A stretch of silence lapsed between them, and then Hopper burst into laughter. A great, big, belly-laugh. Mike laughed, too.

"El's tryin' to get me to quit." He said, and shrugs. He dropped the butt and crushed it under his shoe. "Harder than it sounds."

"She's smart." Mike said. "And stubborn." Hopper hummed in agreement. A beat. Two. Then,

"I'm sorry." Mike blurted. "I mean, for freaking out, when she came back. I said some stuff and I take it back. I know you were trying to protect her. And I'm sorry." Mike takes a breath. Since November, Mike coexisted with Chief. They tolerated each other, because they both loved, er, cared about El. She was the nucleus, the sun, and they were two planets spinning in her orbit. And while he didn't think he could ever forgive the man for hiding El from him for a whole year, he understood the necessity. Sort of. He couldn't believe it'd taken him this long to apologize. Because, let's face it, he acted like a total dickhead, that night.

Hopper reached for another cigarette. Shoved it between his teeth. Didn't light it.

"I'm sorry, too." He said. "I don't know if there was another way it could've worked out, but I know it hurt you. It hurt both of you. And I'm sorry."

Mike blinked, taken aback. That was more than he ever could've

hoped for, out of the Chief. Gruff and cynical at the best of times, Hopper didn't exactly seem like someone in favor of heart-to-heart conversations. They lapsed into silence, again. This time, though, it was comfortable.

"She missed you." Hopper said. "She holed herself up in her room with the T.V. I knew she was trying to reach you. Trying to talk to you. It killed her, being cooped up in here for so long . . ."

"I missed her, too." Mike said, lamely. Hopper nodded.

"Hey, kid, I'm sorry about your parents. Marriage can be a real shit-show. Trust me, I know." Hopper sighed. "You ever need anything, you talk to me. Okay?"

Mike nodded.

"And do me a favor, will you?" Hopper said. "You and El, you take care of each other."

Mike nodded, again.

"Yes, sir."

Mike and El settled themselves into their respective places. El, on her bed. Mike, in the sleeping bag. Hopper tromped down the hall, paused outside the doorway. He drummed his fingers on the door, gave them a pointed look.

"No funny business. Get to bed."

Mike blushed. El nodded, solemnly. After they turned out the lights, and Mike began to drift off, a tiny voice whispered in the dark.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I can't sleep."

"Try counting sheep."

"Sheep?" El asked, puzzled.

"Yeah, imagine a bunch of fluffy white sheep. And count them. It's supposed to help you fall asleep." He explained, realizing how stupid it sounded.

"Weird." El said, and giggled. He laughed, too.

"One sheep, two sheep, three sheep, four—" She stifled a yawn. Then, "Mike?"

"Hmmm?"

"It's not working."

He rolled over on his side, propping himself on one elbow, peering at the indiscernible mass that was El, in the darkness.

"Then, just try thinking about good stuff. Like a spring day. Or your friends. Or Christmas."

El was quiet, for a moment.

"Eggos." She suggested. "You."

Mike's heart fluttered in his stomach.

"Sure, I guess." He said, feeling his face heat up. She fell silent, again. A moment later, he could hear the rustle of blankets, and El clambered out of bed and settled herself beside him, on the floor.

"Okay?" She asked. Mike nodded, then realized she probably couldn't see him, in the dark.

"Uh, yeah. It's okay." He scooted over, making room for her. She laid down, beside him, using his forearm as a pillow. She hummed, contentedly. A stupid grin spread over his face.

"Better." She said. Mike held stock-still, listening to her breathing, soft and sweet. The last time they'd slept together, she'd just closed the gate and saved all their asses. They were both exhausted. But he remembers the way it felt, to hold her in his arms. To feel her body

pressed against his own. To keep her tucked in his embrace, safe and real and all his. He felt invincible. Like the Upside Down and all its demons could show up at their doorstep, this very instant, and they'd be okay. Because she was right here. And he wouldn't let anything take her away from him. Ever again.

"Goodnight, El." He said, quietly.

"Night, Mike." She replied, sleepily.

As he lay there, staring up at the ceiling, his mind wandered to his mother. His mother, with her bleeding hand and broken vase. His father. A slamming door. A shout. And silence.

He tried to imagine a future, with El. He imagined a house on the end of a cul-de-sac. Kids, maybe. A job. He tried to imagine what it would be like, if he played his father's role in the house. Would he waste away his nights in the La-Z-Boy, watching Family Feud? Would there be broken vases and bloody palms and El, on her knees, trying to hide her grief, her pain, from everyone, even her own son? Mike shudders at the thought.

No.

He didn't think his parents ever loved each other. Maybe, though, he loved El. The word had been on his mind lately, when he looked at her, when he kissed her. Or, for instance, right now, with her head resting in the space where his neck meets his shoulder, breath raising goosebumps along his skin.

We're too young, he thought. That was wrong, though. Because if he knew anything about love, he was certain he loved her. That ache in his chest, that want, need, to be with her, every chance he got. He was stealing minutes from the devil himself, just to be with her, to hold her. Isn't that love?

He was young to be thinking about marriage, about kids. About that kind of future. The thoughts were too big, too adult, too frightening—dark clouds in his mental sky.

He hated that phantom version of the future. He wouldn't waste his

days in the La-Z-Boy. He wouldn't shut himself away. There would be no broken vases, and, even if there were, he'd be there, kneeling beside El, picking up the pieces. He'd be there, to hold her, to keep those pieces from falling apart. He'd clean the blood off her palms and the tears off her cheeks and he'd keep her safe. Because hadn't that been his ultimate goal, since the night they pulled her out of the rain?

To keep her safe. To protect her—this girl, who could snap his neck without batting an eye, who looked at him like he was the sun in the sky, like she'd kill for him (which she had, multiple times)—from anything and everything that could take her from him, be it monsters or men.

He didn't love her, right away. It took a couple hours.

He did, however, always feel like he needed to protect her. He felt it when she appeared in front of him, soaking wet, wearing a bloodstained Benny's Burgers t-shirt, on that November night. He felt it as she lay, pale and dying, on a table in Mr. Clark's classroom, while machine gunfire rained outside. He felt it when she finally, finally came back to him, and, not more than ten minutes later, left again to face literal hell and all its demons. He felt it when the Chief's Blazer pulled up outside the Byers house and Hopper stepped out of it with her in his arms, and for one, awful, unbearable moment Mike thought he'd lost her . . . and then she called out, saying his name, reaching for him, and his heart swelled so much he was sure it would burst out of his chest.

He was, simply, a goner.

It was love. He was certain. The thought was exhilarating, and frightening. Scarier, even, than jumping off the edge of that quarry. This time, it was an entirely new kind of falling. The water was rushing up to meet him, alright, and this time, he didn't know if anyone was there to catch him.

23. Summer, 1985

Summer meant sunlight and sweltering heat and the cheap, plastic fans that blasted with cabin with lukewarm air—an incessant drone, like angry bees. Summer meant eating grape popsicles on the front porch, pop songs on the radio, nerf wars in the woods, lazy afternoons doing nothing. Summer meant El could go outside.

The day Hopper gave her the O.K. to go the arcade with the rest of the party, he sat her down and gave her a modified version of the Don't Be Stupid Rules. Except the list contained a single rule. Simple, straightforward: Don't use your powers, unless it's a life-or-death situation.

"Life-or-death, El." Hopper said, firmly. "Understand?"

El nodded, solemnly.

She'd bike to the arcade, with the rest of the party (minus Will; Jonathan would drive him to the Palace, to meet them). At first, Hopper wouldn't let her ride like that, so exposed and visible. But he conceded, guilt bubbling in his gut like poison. He'd kept her locked up for too long. He couldn't play gatekeeper forever. She needed this.

"Alright, then." He said. He pulled her into a hug, ruffling her curls. She squeaked in protest, wrestling from his grasp, and skipped over to the rest of the party, waiting by the door. Together, they tromped out the door, Lucas in the lead, El at the rear.

"Hey, kid?" Hopper said. El paused, in the doorway, glancing at him. He looked at her, for a moment, with an odd expression on his face. He shook his head, cleared his throat.

"Never mind. Just . . . just be safe, okay?"

They rode their bikes to the arcade (except for Max, who rode her skateboard, per usual). El, who didn't have one, rode with Mike—just like the old days. She wrapped her arms around his middle and rested her chin on his shoulder, enjoying the feeling of the breeze against her cheeks and the sun at her back. They came to the crest of

a hill, and Mike leaned off the brake, letting gravity carry them down. Fast. El gasped, clutching Mike's jacket a little tighter, giggling with fear and exhilaration as that swoopy feeling of falling stole over her. She watched the world blur together in a whole spectrum of colors, felt the gentle breeze against her face turn to biting wing. And she laughed, unable to stop herself.

She was free. Finally, finally free. She wasn't an experiment. She wasn't locked in a lab or a cabin. She wasn't hiding, she wasn't running. She wasn't a ghost, a Russian spy, Mike's cousin from Switzerland . . .

She was El. Just El. Just a normal kid.

As the ground leveled out, she loosened her grasp, regaining her equilibrium. Mike shifted, craning his neck to look at her. She grinned at him, and he laughed, and it set them off into peals of laughter that floated through the air.

They ditched their bikes in the parking lot. Will hopped out of Jonathan's car and jogged to catch up.

"Byers!" Lucas called, and slung an arm around his shoulders. El fell into step beside Mike, and he slipped his hand in hers. She smiled, lifted her chin.

Invincible.

The Palace invited a weird, reality-altering ambience. El stared, wide-eyed, as bright colors and fluorescent lights winked at her, from every corner. The noise—a roaring cacophony of digital music, the chatter of conversation, and the clatter of coins deposited into machines. The smell of popcorn, nachos, and pizza hung in the air. Dustin and Will darted off to challenge each other at Pac-Man. Mike suggested she try her hand at *Donkey Kong*, but El wasn't listening. She stood stock-still, watching the people, the lights, the big, electronic machines with their flashing lights. Overwhelmed.

Instinctively, she began counting her breaths, the edges of panic brushing against her mind.

Somebody yelled something, directly behind her. El whipped around, breath snagging in her throat, as a group of kids a year or two older ducked past them, yelling to one another, dodging in and out of the aisles. One of them shoved El, knocking into her shoulder.

"Uh, sorry . . ." He muttered. El glared at him. Mike squeezed her hand.

"You okay?" He asked, concern tugging at his features, pulling tight around his eyes. He touched her cheek.

"Yes." She said, looking at him. "I'm fine."

"El, wanna play *Dig Dug*? I'm pretty good, I can show you how to play." Max said, excitedly. "I mean, only if you want to . . ."

"I want to." El interrupted, quickly, and smiled. Max beamed.

El followed the red-head down the aisle. As they waited for a thin, mousy-haired kid to take his turn, Max leaned against the wall, rolling a quarter between her thumb and forefinger. El mirrored her relaxed, nonchalant stance, surveying the arcade with an even glare. It helped, a little. No one paid her much attention, too intent on beating the top score to notice her. So, El counted her breaths and contented herself with watching the coin dance in and out of Max's finger, flashing silver as it caught the light.

Eventually, her heart rate slowed, and the tension drained from her muscles. Across the arcade, Mike and Will were intent on beating the notorious *Dragon's Lair*; Lucas still held the high score. Mike stepped back from the game, letting Will have a go. He shoved his hands in his pockets, and looked up, catching El's eye. He grinned. She grinned, back.

The kid finished his game, and fished another coin out of his pocket to start another round. Max cleared her throat.

"Hey! Move aside, it's our turn."

"I was here first." He snapped, glaring at Max. "Wait your turn."

"We've been waiting for a hundred years for you to finish your stupid

game! So, you better stop hogging it or I'll kick your ass." Max growled.

The kid shrugged his shoulders, slunk away. Max grabbed the toggle, grinning elfishly at El.

"*This*," she said, "is *Dig Dug*."

She popped a quarter in the slot, and music began to play.

"The object of the game is to kill all these little monsters." Max explained. "You can blow them up or drop rocks on them, but you gotta be careful, because they can kill you, too."

"You can dig tunnels, and . . ." She trailed off, absorbed in the game. El watched, awed, as Max proceeded to beat her previous high score.

A crowd began to gather, around Max. El scanned the sea of faces, she didn't recognize anyone. People pressed in, trying to get a good look at the screen. Too many people, too small a space. El's chest constricted. She needed to get out, get air . . . Someone jostled El out of the way, and she tripped, careening right into . . .

"Hey." Mike said, grabbing her wrists, steadying her.

"Hey." She said.

"What's goin' on?"

"Max is beating her high score on *Dig Dug*." She informed him. Mike grinned, glancing at the screen. Mike hit a growth-spurt, over the winter. He was tall, and getting taller. Whilst El found her line of sight blocked by everyone's shoulders and heads, Mike remained at ground-level, enjoying a clear view of Max's progress. She cursed her height, cursed the fact that she already had to stand on tip-toes to kiss him.

When Max met her demise, the crowd booed. Then came the congratulations. The boy they'd argued with, earlier, clapped her on the back, and a Palace employee wrung her hand. She'd hit 790,000 points.

Max stepped aside, grinning.

"El, you wanna try?"

El nodded. Max moved aside, and El's eyes roved over the controls, overwhelmed.

"It's okay. You'll get the hang of it." Max said, gently. "Here, press START." Max pointed to the button. On the screen, she watched Dig Dug's pixelated icon blinking on the screen. She grabbed the toggle and directed the character into the ground. She lost in the first round, after a blast of fire from one of the green monsters hit her.

"Damn." She swore.

"That was good for your first try." Max encouraged. "The King Twerp himself can't do much better." She said, elbowing Mike's ribs.

"Hey!" He protested.

"Wanna try again?" Max asked.

"No." El said. "You should play, again. You're better at it."

"El, wanna play *Pac-Man*?" Mike asked. She nodded, and he grabbed her hand, sweeping her into a whirlwind of arcade-game education. He showed her almost every single game, and, to her disdain, she sucked at almost all of them. She was, however, damn good at Air Hockey. She beat Mike in a landslide. She played every member of the party and won, even Lucas, who was almost as good as she was. After that match, Lucas clapped her on the back, looked at her with a mixture of awe and respect. When she went up against Dustin, he accused her of cheating.

"She's using her powers!" Dustin groaned, after he knocked the puck into his own goal, by mistake.

"Dustin, shut up!" Mike said, throwing a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"Oh, c'mon Mike. No one's listening! And she's totally cheating. I mean, look at her . . ."

All five heads turned toward her. She rolled her eyes.

"I'm not cheating."

Will swiped his finger under her nose, then inspected it.

"No blood." He said, and shrugged. "She's telling the truth."

"That doesn't prove anything."

"Friends don't lie." El said, firmly. "I didn't cheat, I promise."

Dustin sighed, admitting defeat.

"Fine."

After they'd exhausted their store of quarters, and Jonathan arrived to give Will a ride, the rest of the party retrieved their bikes (and skateboard), and headed to Mike's house.

They went into the basement. El paused, in the doorway. She looked around, taking in the room. It seemed so much smaller than the last time she'd been here, that nightmarish week in November 1983. She smiled, her eyes growing treacherously damp, as her eyes found the D&D table and the old game pieces, the movie posters taped up on the walls, the blanket fort . . .

The fort . . .

Wordlessly, she crossed the room, kneeling beside the fort. She ran her hands over the blankets, piled there.

Home.

That was the only word for it. It was the first place that ever felt like a kind of home, to her. It meant safety—from the rain, from the bad men and the monsters.

El picked up a blanket, buried her face in the fabric. It smelled like Mike. Like home.

Mike knelt, beside her.

"El, you okay?"

She looked at him, and nodded.

"Yeah." She said, returning her gaze to the fort, with its blankets and pillows, and the memory of three-hundred and fifty-three shouts in the void, and a lost, broken boy crying himself to sleep, saying her name, over and over, into that Supercom . . .

"You kept this up." She said. "All this time . . ." She knew, of course. She knew because she saw it, in dreams. In her head. In the void. But seeing it, now, in person, made it all the more real.

"Of course." Mike said. "I couldn't take it down. I thought if I kept it up . . . if I kept it up then maybe . . ." He trailed off, shaking his head. "No, it's stupid."

"No." El said. "It's not stupid." Mike held her gaze, swallowing.

"Well, I thought if I kept it up then maybe you'd know that you still had a home, here. That if you came back, you'd be safe, y'know? All that time, I thought you were a ghost. I could still feel you, and sometimes I could even see you. Or I thought I did, I don't know . . ."

Mike averted his gaze, picking at a loose thread in the carpet. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. Barely a whisper.

"Everyone just kinda acted like you didn't exist. And I couldn't talk about you. And I was going crazy, because I wasn't even sure if you were real, and I . . ." Mike paused, and El realized, with a crushing sort of panic and horror, that his eyes were filled with tears. She grabbed his hand, holding fast.

"I didn't even have a picture of you. Just a memory. And I was so scared that I would forget . . . so, I kept it up. I kept it up because it was almost like you were still here. I guess it's kinda dumb . . ." He laughed, through his tears. But his smile faded, as he looked at her. His brows drew together. He brought his hands to her face, wiped a tear from her cheek. She hadn't realized she was crying.

She wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. "I'm sorry." She breathed, voice shaking.

"Sorry? Why are you sorry?"

"For leaving. For not answering . . . for everything." She said. Her chest ached, burning with guilt and grief.

"You don't have to be sorry, El."

"I know." She said. "But I am."

The party played on the Atari, for a while. Mike's mom came down the stairs, and Mike introduced El as "Jane. She's Chief Hopper's daughter."

"Oh! Nice to meet you, Jane." Mrs. Wheeler said, and offered her hand. ("I didn't know Hopper had a daughter." She said, after El left, that night. "It's a long story." Is all Mike said.) El took it. Mike prayed his mom didn't recognize her from the file those government bastards showed them, when they claimed she was a Russian spy.

He held his breath, but his mother didn't give any indication she recognized El. She wasn't bald anymore, and she'd grown into herself. She was taller, her cheeks were fuller. And nobody (Mike included) would've ever guessed her hair was *that* curly. It fell to her shoulders, now. Not in neat ringlets but in a wild mess of curls, growing every which way.

"Would you kids like to stay for dinner?" Mrs. Wheeler offered. The party, never ones to turn down free food, gladly accepted.

El went upstairs to use the Wheelers' phone. She called Hop, at work. He picked up on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Jane." She said. The name felt strange, on her tongue. But it was safer.

"Jane, kiddo . . . you okay?" He asked. Her gut coiled, uneasily. The panic in his voice was obvious, even through the phone.

"Yeah, everything's fine. I just wanted to ask if I can stay at Mike's for dinner."

An audible sigh, on the other end. Then,

"Yeah, I guess that's fine. Not too late, though, alright? I'll pick you up at eight."

Mrs. Wheeler cooked meatloaf, for all of them. It was delicious, probably one of the best things El had ever tasted. (Because Hop's cooking was meager at best, and she'd been living off Eggos and cold pizza and T.V. dinners for the past year, anyway)

Afterward, she and Mike helped with the dishes. He washed, she dried. He bumped her hip with his leg. She swatted him with a dishtowel. With the dishwasher loaded, Mike and El returned to the basement. Lucas and Max were arguing over which Star Wars movie was the best, and Dustin was sorting through Mike's collection of VHS tapes.

Eventually, they voted on *Alien*. They piled blankets and pillows on the floor. Max snagged the couch, and Lucas settled in, next to her. Mike and El lay on the floor, sharing a blanket. She used Mike's arm as a pillow, huddling against her chest. Warm and safe in Mike's embrace, she let herself drift. Thinking, through a sleepy fog, that as far as first days of freedom went, today wasn't half bad.

Hopper introduced her to the Hawkins Police Department as his daughter on a sultry day in June. Questions arose, of course, but Hopper's glare (one so akin to El's that an outsider would never doubt they were related) silenced them before they were spoken aloud. And that was that.

When El wasn't with the party, she spent her summer days in Hop's office, reading or doodling. She explored the station and helped wherever she could. When Hopper mentioned the file cabinets along the back wall of the station hadn't been touched in years, El volunteered to organize them. Laboriously, she combed through the case files and heaps of loose papers shoved inside, gathering dust. She sorted files categorically, then alphabetically. It was meticulous, taxing work. But she liked it, all the same. It soothed her, distracted her from the shadows and the bad memories that still pressed against

the glass walls of her mind, a little too close for comfort. Turns out, she had quite the knack for filing. Soon, every cabinet, drawer, nook and cranny had been cleaned out, re-organized.

The other officers took a liking to her. Powell and Cal were almost never busy and always good for a game of cards. And Flo loved El. The two took a liking to one another right away. Flo cut out word puzzles from newspapers and brought them to the station, and El would sit with her for hours, gnawing on the end of her pencil, working them out. She taught El how to knit, and El offered to paint the older woman's nails. Flo talked endlessly, telling El stories—tales from her childhood, or about her grandchildren; stories on the news; bits of gossip from the ladies in her bridge club—and El listened, leaning forward in her chair, hand propped on her chin. Absorbing every word.

One day, Flo arrived with a plate full of cookies, promising to teach El how to bake, someday.

"Mmmm, do I smell cookies?" Hopper came out of his office, reaching for the plate. Flo smacked his hand away.

"They're not for you."

Hopper pretended to look offended, and stalked away, sipping coffee from a mug. Later, El retrieved a cookie she'd wrapped in a napkin and stashed in her pocket, and handed it to him.

"Cookie?"

Hopper took one look at the cookie, threw back his head, and laughed. A big, belly laugh.

"You're somethin' else, you know that?"

On Hop's lunch breaks, they got burgers and milkshakes at the diner on the corner, and El told him about her day. About her friends. About a new word she'd learned. And Hop listened. He watched the light, dancing in her eyes. He watched the tiredness, the thinness, the fragility, fade away. He watched her grow up.

They'd come so far. She wasn't the scared, little girl in the woods. She

was a young woman. With friends and a family and a normal(ish) life.

Hopper didn't consider himself particularly religious, but he thanked the big man upstairs, the universe, whatever, for looking out for his little girl. For allowing her a little bit of joy, after so much pain.

For giving him a second chance.

Summer meant lying sprawled on the Byers' living room floor, alongside Will. Sketching for hours.

Summer meant learning how to ride a skateboard. Falling down, skinning her knee. And cascade of bushy red hair, and a hand, offering to help her up.

Summer meant exploring the woods with Lucas, looking for pollywogs and newts in the creek that ran behind the Byers' house.

Summer meant visiting Steve at the ice cream parlor, where he worked. Sitting at the counter, alongside Dustin, devouring a triple-decker scoop.

Summer meant walking hand in hand with Mike, down the train tracks. Listening to his grandiose plans for the Greatest D&D Campaign In History. Standing on tip-toes to kiss him.

Summer meant curling up with Joyce on the couch to watch terrible rom-coms. A Girl's Night. And a mother she didn't have, wanted so badly. A mother she found, in Joyce.

Summer meant reading Nancy Drew on the cabin's front porch, while Hop smoked cigarette after cigarette and Bruce Springsteen's voice floated out of the radio.

On the Fourth of July, they lit sparklers in Mike's backyard. As twilight bled to darkness, they piled into Hop's blazer. He drove to the junkyard where they'd laid a trap for the demodogs, last

November. The party settled on top of the old bus. Mike sat next to her, taking her hand. A hiss, and a pop, and the night sky caught fire. Fireworks burst in the air, and the sound vibrated in El's body. And Mike wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her mouth. She smiled, into the kiss.

Afterward, the party slept over at the Byers'. They built a bonfire, in the backyard, and roasted s'mores. El preferred her marshmallows burnt to a blackened crisp, much to Dustin's disgust. Will piped up, defending her.

"That's the best way to eat them. They're gross on the outside. But inside, they're all melty and gooey." He said, peeling off the charred outside, popping the middle part into his mouth.

"Gross."

When the fire turned to embers, they retired to Castle Byers, arms laden with blankets and pillows, the rest of the marshmallows stashed in Dustin's pockets.

El sat beside Will, sipping from a can of 7UP, nibbling on popcorn kernels. Max and Lucas sat together, playing footsie. Mike lay in the corner, a long-legged sprawl amidst the pillows. Dustin told ghost stories, holding a flashlight under his chin to illuminate his face. But they paled in comparison to the flesh and blood monsters they'd faced, the actual nightmare the did at still plagued them, in waking moments and in sleep. The nightmare they tried so hard to ignore, to push into the deep, dark reaches of memory, hoping it would fade.

That night, El couldn't sleep. She lay on her back, sandwiched between Mike and Max, staring at the tarp ceiling of Castle Byers. She chased sleep, and it continued to evade her. Frustrated, suffocating, she carefully disentangled herself from the blankets and went outside, silent and catlike in the darkness. She settled herself, cross-legged, outside the door. She gazed into the shadows, lengthened by the moonlight.

She knotted her fingers together, absently, straining her ears against the cricket song. A twig snapped, in the darkness, and El jumped out of her skin.

It's probably nothing, she thought, just an animal.

But she couldn't help it. The more she stared into the semi-darkness, the more she thought something might be lurking, out there. Shadows flickered and danced in the corner of her eye. Every shape was a face, every sound unzips her skin and sends shivers slip-sliding down her spinal column.

"El?"

She jumped, whipping around. Mike appeared, crouching by the doorway of Castle Byers. "What're you doing?" He asked, groggily.

"Thinking." She answered, still watching the trees. He sat down, beside her.

"About what?"

"Ghosts." She said, and laughed. Mike smiled.

"Did Dustin scare you?"

"No." She said, defensively. "I just couldn't sleep."

Mike fell silent, looking thoughtful.

"Well, let's think about something else, then." He said. He sighed, leaning back. Castle Byers was situated in a small clearing, devoid of trees. Above them, a pocket of clear sky opened, dotted with glittering stars. Mike smiled.

"The stars . . . they're pretty, tonight."

El glanced up.

"Yeah, they are." She gazed at the sky, at that endless expanse of black and cold and space, feeling small. Insignificant. Somehow, it was almost . . . comforting. She closed her eyes, dipping her toes in the tides that ebbed and flowed at the edge of that infinite space, testing the waters. It lapped against her ankles, so like the black void—the wound, the hole—that lived inside her mind. She inhaled, sharply, taking a step backward. Out of that world. Out of that space.

Worried she'd lose her way, that it would swallow her up.

Mike's voice brought her back.

"I don't know the constellations very well. I think that's Cassiopeia, and that . . . that's the Big Dipper . . ." He said, pointing. El nodded.

"Pretty." She said, and smiled.

Mike and El sat in the dark, gazing at the stars. She listened to him talk about the planets and galaxies, and how if you were looking at the stars you were actually seeing them as they looked in the past, because light took years to travel to Earth. He talked about comets and asteroid fields and black holes . . .

El absorbed it, fascinated.

"El, do you believe in aliens?"

She thought, for a moment. She'd seen movies. Little green guys in flying saucers from Mars, or aliens like E.T., or that weird, mutating monster in *The Thing* . . .

"Yes." She said, slowly.

"I do, too." Mike said. "I don't think we're alone. I think there's life out there, somewhere. There's gotta be." He paused. "And I've seen too much crazy shit to be skeptical about that stuff, anyway. I mean, I didn't believe in interdimensional monsters, before . . ." He trailed off. "Well, you know."

"I know." She said, a smile tugging at her lips.

Eventually, Mike fell silent. And then it was just the sound of their breathing. El suspected he'd fallen asleep. She glanced at the sky, at the black tops of the trees, at the inky black sky slowly turning gray with the first rays of sunlight.

"Mike?" She asked, quietly.

"Mmmm?"

"It's morning."

Summer meant swimming in the lake, at the quarry. Stirring up the mud and clay with her toes, sitting on Dustin's shoulders, playing Chicken-Fight.

Summer meant slumber parties with Max. Pillow fights, Truth-Or-Dare, and cold pizza for breakfast.

Summer meant weekly trips to the library. Scanning the shelves for hours, on end. Setting up a library card. And getting a dirty look from the librarian when she asked to check out thirteen books—eight more than the five-at-a-time policy allowed.

Summer meant sipping lemonade through licorice straws in the shade of the big tree in Mike's front yard. Making plans, joking around. Talking about everything and nothing at all.

Summer meant sitting in big, discarded tires in the junkyard and rolling them down a hill, so fast it made her head spin and her stomach do funny back-flips, but she laughed, all the same.

Summer meant warm nights and even warmer days. Purple nail polish. Bubblegum. Scuffed sneakers.

Summer meant a weekend-long camping trip with Hopper. Helping him set up the tent. Cooking hamburger patties over a campfire, and, after they caught flame, driving twenty miles down the road to eat at a little café, on the side of the road.

Summer meant, for once in her life, little pieces of happiness. Sweltering heat, sunburns, skinned knees, mosquito bites, and all, she was happy. She was free.

24. School Days

El sat beside Hopper, in the Blazer, watching the world flick by, outside the window. She fidgeted, hands twisting absently in her lap, trying to soothe that hollow, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. But it didn't do any good. That all-too familiar feeling of dread seemed to suffocate her, and the more she wrestled with it, the tighter it coiled around her limbs and her chest and her frantic, beating heart. Like a giant snake. Tighter and tighter and tighter . . .

Another, lighter, jumpier feeling opposed it. She was excited, as much as she was . . .

"Nervous?"

El glanced at Hopper, at the steel grey of his eyes, his brows, drawn together in concern, and maybe a little teasing. El didn't answer. She didn't feel much like talking, afraid if she opened her mouth, her lunch might just make an appearance. Her tongue felt big and dry and stuck in her mouth. She managed a small nod. Hopper laughed, not unkindly, and patted her knee.

They were coming up on another year, gone. Her fourteenth birthday came and went. He kept in touch with ol' Doc Owens, who assured him all was quiet. The lab shut down, for good. No more government black ops, no more interdimensional monsters. Just a skeleton of a building and some bad memories.

So, he let her go. He bit his tongue and held his breath and let her leave the house, because it was what she needed. Summer was a trial run. It worked out. They had some fits and jumpstarts, but in the end, it was alright. She'd been introduced to the town as Jim Hopper's formerly-estranged daughter, come to live with him, in Hawkins. There was talk, of course. News spread fast, in a town so small, but the story stuck without much suspicion, and everyone moved on. That was it. El's appearance in Hawkins was just another link in the chain of gossip, nothing more. Still, Hopper didn't get much sleep. He kept his pistol in a drawer, by his bed. He tossed and turned, jolted awake by every little noise, in the night. Worse, he spent every waking moment expecting a phone call, expecting government

bastards to break down his door and take his kid away.

But it didn't happen. And June turned to July and July turned to August and the promise of fall, a chill, tainted the summer heat. And finally, *finally*, Hopper decided he'd reached the extent of his ability to educate El. That she needed a real education, and all it entailed. After everything, she deserved a normal life.

So, here she was, bound for her first day of high school. She was starting as a freshman, with the boys. After she passed the placement exam, after she studied until her eyeballs were ready to fall out of her head.

She glanced down at her outfit, as the knee-length, black skirt. A yellow, wool sweater. At the end of the summer, Nancy took her shopping. And they'd picked out a whole bunch of new outfits, ones El adored. She wasn't quite punk, but getting there. Leather jackets, dark clothes, but also comfy, bright things. Skirts and sweaters. Pinks and greens.

She walked out of the mall, listening to Nancy talk about the colleges she planned to apply to, telling her funny stories about Mike, and feeling, for once in her life, perfectly, extraordinarily ordinary. Instead of going home, Nancy drove her to the salon to get her hair cut and styled. Afterward, they both got manicures. El chose a bright, bubble-gum pink.

Hopper pulled into the parking lot of the high school. El fumbled with the seat belt, senses kicking into overdrive, eyes skimming the parking lot and the campus, beyond. Searching for a glimpse of familiarity, of safety, within the masses. She reached for the door handle, froze, as Hopper grabbed her wrist.

"El . . ."

She turned, looking at him, mind blank. The nerves were gnawing at her insides. And she thought nerves weren't like butterflies. They were rats. Big, hairy, flea-bitten rodents that crawled in your insides and gnawed and gnawed and gnawed, paring tissue from bone with restless teeth and claws.

"Remember our rule, alright? No powers. Unless . . ." Hopper prompted.

"Unless it's life-or-death, I know." El said. "I won't do anything stupid, I promise."

Hopper smiled.

"Listen to your teachers. Be respectful. Be polite." He said. El bobbed her head, impatiently.

"I know."

She got out of the car, swung her backpack (also brand-new) over her shoulder.

"Ellie?" She looked at Hopper.

"I love you."

She smiled.

"I love you too, Dad."

It wasn't the first time he'd said it. But those occurrences were few and far between. It was still hard for him, to choke on those words and feel them turn to ashes in his mouth. And he knew it was stupid, to hold onto Sara, after all this time. To withhold love and affection from El because he was still caught between slides. Stuck in the past. It wasn't fair to her. It wasn't fair to Sara. Because he knew his daughter would've wanted him to move on, would've wanted him to savor this second chance. She wouldn't have wanted him to keep those words locked inside. She wouldn't have wanted him to deny El what most everybody took for granted. Loving somebody, and having them love you back. He wanted to give that to her. He wanted to be a parent. He wanted to be a father, a protector, a confidant. He wanted to keep her safe. And most of all, he wanted her to know that he loved her. Because she'd been denied that, all her life. And it made him sick.

So, made himself say it. He made himself say it because he thought he hadn't said it enough. He wasn't getting any younger. And if an

interdimensional monster didn't kill him, the damn cigarettes might. He made himself say it, because she hadn't heard it nearly as often as she should've. He made himself say it, because it was true.

And she smiled. She smiled, and said it back. And she called him Dad. And for a second, he wasn't sending El off to her first day of high school (scratch that, first day of public school, like, ever), he was looking at Sara. And El's brown eyes looked oddly blue, and her hair was curly, blond, and tied up in pigtails instead of dark and tumbling to her shoulders. And he damned the universe for pulling the rug out from under his feet, for playing those tricks. He blinked, swiped a hand over his face, and Sara was gone. And El was walking away, curls bouncing, adjusting the strap of her backpack. Straight-backed. Tall. Larger than life.

He watched her go, bitter melancholy stirring tides in the cesspool of his heart. The part of him that lay awake at night, the part of him that kept that pistol in the top-drawer of his bedside table, wanted to run after her. Wanted to scoop her in his arms and carry her back to the cabin and keep her there, safe, forever. He cursed the kids that would inevitably hurt her, in some way, or another. The kids he knew would think she was dim, or stupid, because they didn't know the whole story. Because they didn't know how smart she was. So, so smart, and curious, and bright, for picking up on nine years' worth of education (or lack thereof) in ten months. Because they didn't know how excited and scared she was, for this moment. How she woke up this morning and looked in the mirror, and she didn't see a lab rat or a monster but a normal, teenage girl. They didn't know that wasn't always the case.

The other part of him, that part of smiled at her, as she walked away. Away from him, and toward the next chapter. A new normal. For both of them. Because he knew she was ready. He knew she deserved this. That part of him tapped on his shoulder, impatiently. Reminded him that she could throw anyone across a room like a sack of potatoes without blinking an eye. And she had her friends. Those kids. Those boys (and Max). She had Wheeler, who'd made it his life's mission to protect her. Who'd risked his life to save her, already. Who loved her, Hopper suspected, feeling nauseous. Who loved her as completely and unconditionally as was possible to love another

human being. And they were just kids, but they were so much more than that.

She had this haphazard little family they'd built, together. This little family, with barely any real blood relations, made of broken people with broken lives, glued back together again. This family, with its jagged edges. This family had been to literal hell and back, sometimes twice. This family fought interdimensional monsters. And the family that fought interdimensional monsters together, stayed together.

She had her friends, and she had him, and she had all the people who'd survived those horrific nightmares. She had an army of people willing to kill for her, and superpowers to boot. It was time to let her go.

Carefully, he extracted a cigarette out of the pack in his jacket pocket, jammed it between his teeth, and pulled out of the parking lot.

El squared her shoulders, trying to gather all those thousands of gnawing, scratching rats at lock them away, somewhere deep inside. She ducked her head, as was habit. *Keep your head down, keep walking. Don't let your eyes wander. Don't cause any trouble. If you cause trouble, he'll lock you away . . .* It was a constant mantra, in her head, during her time in the lab. And it was flooding her senses, now. *Keep your head down. Keep your eyes straight ahead. Keep your head down . . .*

She could practically feel Papa's (Brenner's) long, pale fingers coiled around her wrist, fingernails pinching her skin. She could smell his cologne. She could feel the eyes of a thousand faceless men in white coats, clutching clipboards to their chest. She was suffocating. And it hurt. Her chest ached, as she struggled for air. Her head pounded. The cells in her brain began to die, the veins and capillaries began to wither . . .

And then a voice rose, out of the din of conversation, dissipating the clouds in her mental sky.

"El!"

She turned, just in time to catch a glimpse of Mike as he ran up and threw his arms around her. She hugged him back, fisting her fingers in the fabric of his sweatshirt . . . drawing a breath as wonderful and sweet as the first breath of air after a lifetime of drowning.

"Mike!" She said, as he drew away. He glanced at her, cheeks reddening. And El cocked an eyebrow, perplexed.

"Uh, you . . . you look really . . . really pretty." He said. She smiled, sheepishly, unable to stop the blood rising in her cheeks.

"Thanks."

Mike coughed, fidgety and restless. "C'mon, the guys are over there." He pointed, and El followed the line of his finger to a big, sprawling willow tree on the lawn, outside the front steps. He took her hand, led her through the throng of people—no longer faceless men in coats, but kids. Peers. Talking and hugging and recounting tales of a glorious, infinite summer. Nobody paid her any attention, and she liked that just fine.

They joined Lucas and Dustin under the tree, and compared schedules. El had Algebra, and Biology with Mike, much to her delight. She shared P.E. with Lucas, and Art with Dustin. She was taking a slower-paced English class, due to her limited vocabulary, and so it was the only class she didn't have with any of them.

"Hey, losers!" A voice yelled, behind them, Max ran up to greet them in a flurry of red hair. She hugged El.

"Ready for your first day?"

El nodded, smiling.

"Don't look so cheerful. It's all a big shit-show, anyway." She said, rolling her eyes.

"At least Troy and James won't mess with us, anymore. Not while El's around." Lucas said.

"Why not?" Max asked.

"Because El broke Troy's arm in seventh grade."

"She also made him piss himself." Dustin said, with a snort.

El grinned, at the memory. She glanced over her shoulder, scanning the sea of faces for any sign of that mouth breather. The one who pushed Mike, who tried to make him jump to his death . . . El looked at Mike, eyes tracing the thin, white scar on his chin. Anger, sudden and intense, boiled in her gut. She averted her eyes, toeing the ground, unearthing a pill bug. She watched it struggle to right itself, little arms flailing in the air, all the while imagining all the thing she'd like to do to that rotten little twerp . . .

And breaking his other arm capped the list.

No. She couldn't. She promised Hop she'd keep her powers under control, and she intended to keep that promise.

Will joined them as the bell rang. El followed Mike to Biology, their first period class. They bid the party goodbye and headed toward the steps. The rats gnawed in her gut, again, but Mike's calm, steady presence beside her soothed them. She slipped her fingers in the spaces between his own, and he held tight, giving her a little squeeze.

They arrived just before the bell rang, signaling the start of class. El's eyes scanned the class, taking in the chalkboard, the desks, the lab tables lined with jars full of formaldehyde and floating, dead animals. The desks were arranged in rows, each its own island. The room was horrifyingly similar to the classroom where she destroyed the Demogorgon, two years ago. She took a breath, knees turning to jelly. The roar of conversation faded in and out, like radio feed clouded with static, and the colors in the room began to blur together. And she could hear the distant sound of gunfire—a thousand bullets sinking into dry wall and, sometimes, flesh. And she could hear a ghost of Mike's voice, thick with tears, begging her to hold on, just hold on . . .

"El, you okay?" Mike asked, squeezing her hand. The room swam back into focus. She nodded, forced a smile.

"I'm okay."

Mike didn't look convinced. He opened his mouth to press the matter, but El brought a hand up to his cheek, silencing him.

"I'm fine, Mike." She said. "I promise."

A voice rose above the chatter of conversation. El looked around, eyes landing on a wizened, old woman who must've been their teacher.

"Sit where you want, for today. I'll assign seats later in the week." She said. She sat on a stool, observing them with watery-blue eyes framed with thick spectacles.

"El, there's a seat over here . . ." Mike gestured to a pair of desks towards the back of the class. She dropped into the seat beside Mike. She pinched the bridge of her nose, sucking in a breath. Over and over, reminding herself to keep it together, focus . . .

She lifted her eyes, glancing at the posters on the walls, showing the bone structure and blood vessels in the human body, and another, a flowchart, depicting drawings of the different stages of cell division. Her attention was torn away from them as their teacher rapped on the chalkboard with her knuckles to great their attention.

"Welcome to Biology! I'm excited to share a new year with you all." The woman said, smiling. "I'm Mrs. Jones." She wrote her name on the board, underlined it. She turned back to the class, and her blue eyes found El's brown ones. Her smile deepened, reaching her eyes, and El smiled back. Shyly. Tentatively.

"Now, for the first order of business. Textbooks." She asked a pudgy kid with curly, red hair to retrieve a stack of textbooks. He passed them down the rows of desks. A tall, willowy girl handed El a book and smiled at her. She pushed a strand of dirty blond hair out of her face and stuck out her hand.

"I'm Natalie."

"Jane." El said, and took her hand. They shook, and El felt the weight in her gut lighten, just a little.

"Are you a freshman?"

"Yeah." El said. "I was homeschooled." She explained, rehearsing the story her and Hop agreed upon.

"You're so lucky! Public school sucks."

El wrinkled her nose, shook her head.

"Homeschool is boring." El said. "There's nothing to do."

Natalie opened her mouth, closed it again, as Mrs. Jones called for their attention. Natalie shot El an apologetic look, and turned toward the front of the room.

"Alright, if you'll open your books to page sixteen. We'll be reviewing the Introduction to Biology and Life Sciences. Chris, will you read the first paragraph?"

El fidgeted in her chair, worrying her lip, as Mrs. Jones called on her fellow classmates at random. And then El heard the words she dreaded most . . .

"Jane, kindly read the next paragraph."

El couldn't hear properly. *What did she say?* She froze, locking eyes with Mike. He nodded. Her eyes flicked to Mrs. Jones. She smiled, encouragingly.

El nodded, eyes falling on the page. Blood rushed in her ears, flooded her cheeks. Her mouth went dry. She sat up in her chair, took a deep breath. She stumbled through the paragraph, wishing all the while she'd been gifted with the ability to teleport, or else, turn invisible. Every cell in her body screamed for her to run . . .

She wanted to sink through the floor.

But she fought it. She read, tripping over the difficult, unfamiliar, carboard words. A couple kids snickered, and she tried to ignore them, but their laughter rang in her ears, clear and sharp, buzzing in her skull.

The words didn't flow sweetly like the words in the stories Hop read to her, nor did they tell of wonderful, bold adventures like the words

that fell in a rush out of Mike's mouth as he wove his D&D campaigns, voice trembling with excitement he could barely contain. They were rough, unpleasant, alien. Twice, she paused, staring at a word, at loss. But then Hop's voice would come back to her, scratchy and smelling of tobacco, urging her to *"sound it out, El, you can do this . . ."*

Finally, she finished. She took a breath, risked a glance around the classroom. Mrs. Jones called on the next unfortunate soul, and the class' attention shifted. El released a breath she didn't know she was holding. Mike's hand brushed hers, under the desk. He smiled, and El felt herself relax.

After a time, the bell rang, and El jumped up. She grabbed her textbook, shoved it in her bag, and headed for the door. Mike rushed after her.

"It's gonna be a long year." He sighed. "I mean, what kinda teacher assigns twenty pages of reading on the first day?"

"A shitty one." A voice interjected, and Natalie fell into step beside El. "All period long, too. I mean, are you kidding me?"

"Hey, Natalie." El said. "This is Mike."

"Yeah, I know. We had P.E. together, in middle school."

"With Mr. Densmore?" Mike asked. "Crazy old fucker." He laughed, reminiscent. "Oh, man . . ."

Natalie turned to El.

"The guy had pit stains like you wouldn't believe." She explained.

El giggled, wrinkling her nose.

"Gross."

"I know, right?" Natalie grinned. "Anyway, I gotta go. Nice meeting you, Jane." She headed in the opposite direction, toward the B building.

Mike walked El to art class. She found a seat near Dustin and Will, and sat down. Their art teacher was nice enough, and she assigned a simple shading assignment that became a sort of therapeutic exercise for El, staving off some of the anxiety of the day. And while hers didn't look like much (especially compared to Will's, whose geometric shapes seemed to leap off the page) she was proud, all the same.

She liked her English class the best. Their teacher read a few chapters from *Of Mice and Men*, then asked each of them to write a poem about anything they wanted. She set about the task painstakingly, writing and re-writing and scrapping her work, putting deep teeth marks on her pencil as she chewed the end of it, frustrated. Eventually, though, she had the beginnings of a poem she liked. She liked the freedom. Poetry wasn't like normal writing. It was forgiving. It didn't have to be organized. It didn't even have to make sense. It just needed to tell the truth.

At lunch, she stood in the doorway of the cafeteria, fingers fumbling with her backpack straps, absently, staring at the masses. Kids fought over tables, and the lunch line was crowded and unruly. Eventually, she spotted Lucas and Max sitting at a table. Lucas waved her over. She steeled herself, crossing the room. She dropped onto the bench, beside Max. The redhead flicked at a lock of El's hair.

"Hey, weirdo." Max said.

"Hey." El said.

"I'm *dreading* P.E. next period. Wanna skip?"

El frowned.

"On the first day?"

"Why not?"

El shook her head, rolled her eyes. Across the room, she spotted Dustin and Will. Dustin slammed his lunch tray on the table, and several pudding containers spilled over the bench and onto the floor.

"Shit!" Dustin swore.

El snagged one, tearing off the wrapper, and dug her spoon into it.

"Mmmmm." She said, appreciatively.

"Hey!" Dustin said, and swatted at her, playfully. "Those were mine."

"Finders keepers." El retorted, eyes flashing mischievously.

"Hey, sorry I'm late. I talked to Mr. Barnes about joining A.V. club. He said there's a sign-up on the office bulletin." Mike said, tossing his backpack on the floor. He bent down, wrapped his arms around El's shoulders, and pressed a kiss to her crown. She hummed, contentedly. Mike settled himself in the chair, beside her, as Dustin feigned retching.

"No P.D.A in the cafeteria, *Michael*." He said, and threw a potato chip at him. Mike flipped the bird.

"Fuck off, Dustin."

"No, he's right. I think it would be best if you two kept your mouths and hands off each other for the sake of our sanity. And our appetites." Max said. "And since this party is a democracy, I think we should vote. All in favor of a no P.D.A rule for the lovebirds, say 'aye'".

"Wait a minute! Shouldn't the rule apply to you, too?" Mike said. Max glanced at Lucas.

"We, unlike you, are against public displays of affection. For the sake of young eyes, of course." Max said. She took a bite of her pizza slice.

"So, all in favor?"

Four shouts of "aye!" rose from the table.

"That's not how it works." Mike mumbled. Max smiled, patted Mike's back, sympathetically.

"Oh, *Michael*." She said. "That's exactly how it works."

Mike rolled his eyes. El giggled.

Their conversation turned to their classes and A.V. club and their upcoming D&D campaign. Normal things. El stole food from Mike's tray, and his hand found hers under the table. When the bell rang, she peeled away from the group and headed toward the locker rooms, with Max.

They changed into their gym shorts and traded bits of conversation. Neither was one for gossip, and El wasn't big on words, period, and so they fell into a comfortable silence as they went into the gym and sat with the other freshman girls, on the bleachers.

"Wanna sleep over, Saturday?" El asked. "I'm sure Hop won't mind." Max nodded, smiling. "Yeah. Neil's driving me crazy, lately. It'll be nice to get out of the house, for a while . . ." She trailed off. El smiled, sympathetically. El knew Max's had it bad, at home. She'd met Mr. Hargrove in person, once. She recognized a mouth breather when she saw one.

She had Algebra with Mike, the last period of the day. She arrived as the bell rang, eyes sweeping the classroom, looking for Mike. She found him, standing by a desk, talking to a tall, pretty, brunette. El stopped short.

The girl was leaning close to Mike, laughing at something. Mike's cheeks were red, and his eyes kept darting away from the girl's face, as if searching for an escape. El didn't like the way she was looking at him. The girl reached up, touching Mike's shoulder, and El went cold. She felt that familiar surge of jealousy well up inside her. She stomped over to where they were standing, fingernails digging into the skin of her palms as she clenched them into fists. She cleared her throat.

"Hi, Mike." She said, loudly. Mike turned, eyes landing on her face.

"Jane!" He said. "Hey." He looked relieved. She took his hand, stood on tip-toes to plant a kiss on his cheek. She turned, levelling the girl with a cold stare. The girl shifted her weight, expression turning sour.

"Hi." El said, coolly. "I'm Jane."

The girl stood a little taller, brows knitting.

"I'm Ava. Ava Davidson." She turned to Mike. "I have to go. Bye, Mike." She sniffed, pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, and walked away. El glanced at Mike.

"Sorry." He said. "I didn't know what to do. She just marched right up and started talking to me like she'd known me her whole life." He sighed. "I don't know what her deal was."

"Mike." She said, rolling her eyes.

"What?" He asked, defensive.

"You're clueless."

"I'm not!"

"She likes you."

Mike frowned.

"Not likely. In middle school, she started a rumor that I liked guys. Called me a 'fag' or whatever." Mike shrugged. El's lip curled.

"Bitch." She said.

"Definitely." Mike said, nodding. He took her hand, face softening. "C'mon, let's find a seat."

After school, she went to Mike's house. They played on the Atari for a while, until El got bored. They went up to his room and lay on their backs on the carpet, holding hands, talking. When they ran out of things to talk about, they fell into a comfortable silence.

Mike propped himself up on one elbow, looking down at El, playing with the tips of her hair. It fell to her shoulders, and Mike couldn't keep his hands out of the soft, chocolate curls. She smiled, contented to just lie there, letting his nearness, his scent, the feel of his fingers in her hair, soothe her into a kind of trance. But the moment was over all too soon. The sound of the doorbell ringing cut through the silence, and El's eyes shot open. She sat up.

"It's probably Hop."

They went downstairs. And there was the chief, standing on the front porch with his hat in his hands, fiddling with the brim.

"Hey, kiddo. Ready to go?"

She nodded, then turned to Mike. She hugged him.

"Bye, Mike."

She followed Hop down the walk and climbed into the passenger seat of the Blazer. Hop got in the driver's side, fired up the engine.

"So, how was it?" He asked. And El told him, happily chattering on and on about her day. About her classes and her teachers and new friends. And Hopper let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

She was alright. Learning and growing, already wise beyond her years. And smart. So, so smart.

She was alright. They were alright.

He grinned, ruffled her curls.

"That's great, El." He said.

And he meant it.